

t h e B e a u t i f u l W o r l d

キノの旅 V

時雨沢恵一

Illustration: 黒星紅白



Kino no Tabi
-the Beautiful World-
vol. V

by Keiichi Sigsawa

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電撃文庫

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Prologue: At Dusk - B -Will - B-

Ah.

Everyone says otherwise, but I think this place is beautiful.

Everyone says otherwise, but I think this place has something new to offer every day.

When I first laid eyes on this place, my mind went blank.

I've seen this place dozens of times now, but even now I find it beautiful. I never get tired of it. I want to see it again tomorrow, too.

But...

I think I'm the only one who thinks that way.

Is something wrong with me?

Am I insane?

Am I broken?

This world is brilliant.

That's right.

It calms and encourages me. It helps me to forget the hardships in my life.

But even if that's proof that something is wrong with me, that I'm insane and broken...

Even still, I'm glad that I can think this way. I treasure this moment, when I feel this way.

Ah.

I'm going to gaze out at this place in the days to come.

Even if the rest of the world calls this place ugly,

And even if it goes against all human morals to call it beautiful,

I'll keep watching this place, for as long as it moves my heart.

"Food's ready, Will. Come on down."

"Be right there."

I can't keep my dear friends waiting.

I salute once more at the beautiful world and climb down the ladder.

*



Chapter 1: Memories of that Day -Blue Rose-

“Oh, I have a splendid idea! You must take me with you. I want to travel too,” said the boy.

The black-haired traveler and the motorrad went silent. They were at a loss.

They stood in a splendid garden, surrounded by beds of red and blue roses. Water spouted from a marble fountain nearby.

“Don’t you think so? I think I will learn so very much if I were to travel. I could see many places and grow wiser. So take me with you,” the boy asked, excited.

The traveler, who had been telling stories from the outside world at the boy’s request, was very taken aback. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Nope,” the motorrad agreed.

The boy howled, “Why not? Why is it that you travel the world while I am forced to stay here?” he turned to the old man. “What do you say? Can I please go travel?”

The old man was also troubled, but he replied firmly, “I’m afraid you cannot.”

“Why not? Do you dare defy me? Is that what it is?” the boy demanded, grabbing the old man.

The traveler noted the old man’s concern and stood, readying the motorrad to leave. “If you’ll excuse us, then.”

This time, the child waddled to the traveler. “Why? Why can’t I go?”

The traveler looked at the child. “Traveling is very dangerous.”

“Yeah. And I only have room for one anyway,” the motorrad agreed.

The traveler said goodbye to the old man and began to push the motorrad away. The child followed, shouting.

“Please take me with you! I’ll do anything you say! I’ll be good! I’ll even eat all my carrots! I can sleep alone at night even without Mother! So please!”

Once more, the traveler told the boy that he could not come, leaving with the

motorrad in spite of the boy's pleas.

When the roar of the motorrad's engine disappeared into the distance, the boy burst into tears.

They stood in a splendid garden, surrounded by beds of red and blue roses. Water spouted from a marble fountain nearby.

The boy buried his face in the old man's chest and wept on and on.



The much older man woke up the boy, who had become a man. He had been nodding off in his chair, inside a majestic office.

The boy who was now a man thanked the much older man and told him about the dream he had.

“I’m sorry I was such a coddled brat,” he said, apologizing to the much older man and remarking how he still remembered that day very clearly.

The old man smiled gently and gave a deferential bow.

*

I think it's beautiful because I think that it's beautiful

-Have I ever seen the beautiful world?-



Chapter 2: The Country Where Murder is not Illegal - Jungle's Rule-

The endless plains were covered in grass and trees.

Clear groundwater pooled in the lowlying areas to form small lakes that dotted the landscape.

It was summertime, with the radiant sun smiling upon the land and the water. Not a cloud was in sight, allowing the sky to spread undisturbed for miles and miles.

A lone, narrow road cut through the plains. It was covered in patches of grass, a sign that few ever traversed it. The road snaked its way around the lakes and went from east to west.

Moving west down the road was a motorrad. Its luggage rack was fully laden with travel gear that threatened to spill over the sides of the rear wheel. A silver cup hanging by the bags clattered each time the motorrad hit a bump in the road.

The motorrad's rider was in a black vest and a white shirt with the collar unbuttoned. She wore a thick belt, and a holstered hand persuader on her right thigh. A slender automatic persuader was secured behind her back at her waist.

The rider also wore a hat and a pair of goggles. She was still quite young, likely in her mid-teens.

"Look, Kino. A horse," the motorrad said without warning.

The rider called Kino narrowed her eyes and looked ahead. "I see it. And a person, too."

Kino took her left hand off the handle and checked the persuader behind her back. She then switched hands to check the revolver on her right thigh. "We're stopping for a bit, Hermes."

A fully-laden horse stood drinking water by the road, at the edge of the lake. The sound of the engine woke up the man who had been lying next to it with a

hat over his face.

The man was in his twenties, dressed in riding pants and boots with a light jacket. A .45 caliber automatic hand persuader was holstered at his right side.

He waved at the incoming motorrad.

“Hi there,” the man said when Kino stopped Hermes.

Kino disembarked without shutting off the engine, and propped up Hermes on his side stand. “Hello.” “Hi.”

The man asked, “You from the country up ahead?”

“No,” Kino replied, “We’re on our way there now.”

The man gave an approving look. “I’m on my way there myself. what do you say to heading there together? Mind if I put half my luggage on your motorrad? Your ride can take it,” he said without a hint of apology.

“I’ll have to decline,” Kino said, also without a hint of apology. Hermes agreed.

The man grimaced. “What? Can’t spare a bit of help for a fellow traveler?”

“I’m afraid not,” Kino replied, smiling. “And what if I were to steal your things? I might even reach the country first and sell them off.”

“Tch. ...Anyway,” the man said, “Do you know about that country? About the kinda place it’s supposed to be?”

“Not really, but I’ve heard it was full of polite people.”

The man burst into laughter, howling. “Who told you that crap? It’s the complete opposite!”

“What do you know about that country, then?” Kino asked.

The man guffawed again. “All right, all right. Lemme tell you—that country over there? Murder’s not illegal.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermes.

“Means murder’s not forbidden by law. Kinda funny, since theft *is* considered a crime. Either way, you can get off scot-free hurting or killing someone.

Basically, if you die, it's your own fault. A lawless jungle inside manmade walls. I thought everyone knew this stuff," the man said, amused.

Kino asked, "Is that why you're headed to that country?"

"Sure is. On my way to settle there. Place I'm from is stupidly safe and happy and peaceful. Smack someone and folks'd never get off your back. Illegal this, illegal that. So I took off and never looked back."

"What're you going to do once you settle there?" asked Hermes.

"Hm. I'll give the place a try," the man said, pausing dramatically. "And if someone ticks me off, I'll put him down. I'll finally get to be myself once I get there."

"Huh," Hermes said, uninterested.

The man had expected a better reaction. He continued, "And you know what else? This guy I respect lives in that country. Regel. You must have heard of him."

"I haven't." "Nope." Kino and Hermes replied.

"What kinda backwater country are you from?" the man sighed, and explained, "Regel's a serial killer. Used to lead a band of terrorists and bandits in this big country down south in the old days. They arrested him, but he broke out of jail and skipped town before they could take him to the gallows. This was decades ago, but if they still haven't caught him, he's gotta be living in that country. People call it the killer's final home, you know. Where every killer in the world goes eventually. I'm willing to bet he's living like a real free man, knocking off anyone who bugs him and terrorizing people. I wanna learn from him."

"I see. If you'll excuse us, then," Kino said, climbing back on Hermes.

"Real life of the party, aren't you?" the man spat, but added, "Hey, you sure you won't help me with my things?"

"Yes. You can take them yourself," Kino replied matter-of-factly and took off on Hermes.

The man was left alone in the dust.

“That’s how it’s gonna be, eh? You’ll change your tune once we’re both in that country,” he muttered, watching Kino and Hermes depart.

The country’s boundaries were made up of stone walls, canals, and lakes.

The lakes in the area had been connected by manmade canals to form a moat around the country, and tall white ramparts stood around the inner perimeter.

It was already evening by the time Kino and Hermes arrived at the gates. The drawbridge slowly opened.

“I can’t wait to see what’s inside,” Hermes said casually, “A country where murder’s not illegal, huh.”

“Me neither.”

“Is your mind ready, Kino?”

“For now.”

“What about your persuaders?”

“Don’t worry, they’re always ready. Let’s go.”

They crossed the drawbridge.

“Are you a visitor? Or are you applying for immigration?” asked the guard-cum-immigrations officer at the small guardhouse outside the gates.

Kino identified herself as the former and asked for a three-day visitor permit.

“I’m obligated to inform you that murder is not forbidden by law in our country,” the guard explained. “Anyone here, whether citizen or traveler, is permitted to kill for any reason at all, and will not be held legally responsible. Do you understand this clearly?”

Kino nodded.

“Are you sure?” the guard asked once more.

“What a strange country,” Kino said, unloading her things.

The hotel room was humble, furnished with a bed and a chair, along with an electric lamp and a fan on the wall. In the corner was a fireplace that had been sealed because it was no longer used.

“Really? It looks normal to me,” Hermes said, propped up in a corner on his center stand.

“Exactly. It’s normal. The streets are clean, and people are out and about after dark. There’s no fear in the air, not a lot of police officers, and no stores with sturdy shutters. The locals are even friendly to travelers.”

Kino and Hermes had crossed a stretch of farmland on their way from the gates to the town. When Kino asked for directions to a hotel in town, everyone within earshot had gotten together to offer genuine help.

“What does that mean?” asked Hermes.

“It means public security’s great. Which is what I find so strange about this place.”

“I see,” Hermes said, “Since murder’s not illegal, I bet you were hoping to see armed mobs roaming the streets, duels over girls in the pubs, and dogs biting people’s hands, right? Too bad.”

“I don’t think ‘hoping’ is the right word.”

Kino put her things down next to the bed, then took off her holsters and vest. She pulled out Cannon, the revolver she had strapped to her thigh.

“I have a hunch,” she muttered, her eyes on Cannon’s black glint.

“Hm?”

“Never mind. We might find out before we leave,” Kino said, lying down in bed. She placed Cannon over her chest.

“What are you talking about? ...Oh, I guess you can’t even hear me now, can you? Good night.”

As usual, Kino rose at dawn.

The sky outside the window was a vivid blue, streaked with feathery clouds. The streets were quiet.

Kino began with light exercises. Then she trained with Cannon and Woodsman, the latter of which was the automatic persuader she carried behind her back. Drawing practice came first, followed by drills for shooting with the

holster. Afterwards, she took apart the persuaders, cleaned and oiled them, and put them back together and holstered them.

Kino showered and had breakfast at the hotel. She smacked Hermes awake around noon and left the hotel.

Old stone buildings lined the streets. The most developed area was crowded with stores that doubled as residences from the second floor up.

Kino stepped into a store and sold things she didn't need and bought things she needed. The kindly middle-aged shopkeeper gave her hefty discounts when he learned that she was a traveler.

Behind the shopkeeper's chair was a long rifle-type persuader. When Kino asked if the rifle was for deterring robbers, the man shook his head. "Not at all. No one's ever robbed any of the stores around here. This here persuader," he said, "is for killing people."

"Oh. When?" asked Hermes.

"Who knows? Well, I guess I do know, but I keep the old thing here because no one *really* knows," the shopkeeper replied.

"I see," Kino said quietly.

Afterwards, Kino and Hermes explored the country. It was not particularly large—they were back in the middle of town by the afternoon.

Kino spotted a restaurant with a patio. She parked Hermes there and took a seat. A cool breeze blew into the shade.

When Kino asked for something sweet, the server insisted on a particular item on the menu, ordering it before Kino could even nod.

"Here you are. Take your time and enjoy."

The server brought in a large plate stacked with layers of crepe and cream. It was a veritable mountain of dessert.

"Kino?" said Hermes.

"It's important to never back down from a challenge," Kino said, cutting up the crepes to pieces.

Eventually, she polished off the entire plate as Hermes watched in utter shock.

That was when a group of elderly people came by and sat at a nearby table. An old woman in gaudy clothing asked, “Oh my, are you a traveler?”

When Kino told her that she was, the women of the group broke out into excited chatter. They explained, unprompted, that they were on their way back from dancing, and that they always came by to this restaurant afterwards, which was why they were there that day.

“Don’t you find this a safe city, Traveler?” asked one of the old women.

“I do. It’s very impressive,” Kino admitted.

An old man with a cane in his hand and a grand white beard asked, “Where are you headed, then?”

“I don’t know,” Kino replied.

“Does your motorrad know?”

“No way,” Hermes said.

“Hm... Then what do you say to settling down here?” asked the old man.

“Yes, you simply must! We can help you with everything. Find you a lovely house nearby and register you at the office. It’s really simple, just write your name on a slip of paper and you’ll be all set to—”

“What do you say?” the old man asked calmly, cutting off his chatty friend. “I think this country would be a good fit for someone like you.”

“What do you mean?” Hermes asked. The old man chuckled.

“I mean someone who can kill.”

Kino thought for a moment and shook her head.

“Really? Such a shame. In any case, do enjoy your stay here. Traveling’s no easy task, I know, so get some rest and relaxation for yourself while you can.”

“Thank you, sir. I will.”

“I’d like to treat you to one of our specialty desserts, if you’d like. It’s quite

good; a suitable gift for a traveler. You could tell us some stories from the outside in exchange, perhaps?" the old man offered.

Kino shook her head again, looking visibly upset. Hermes explained, "Too bad. Kino just finished an entire plate."

"Really, now? That's unfortunate. Then what do you say to some tea tomorrow before lunch?"

The next day. It was the third day of Kino's visit.

Kino rose at dawn. She did light exercises and persuader drills before showering and having breakfast, a little disgruntled.

Afterwards, Kino packed up her things and secured them to Hermes.

Smacking Hermes awake, Kino headed for the restaurant from the previous day. The bearded old man was waiting for her with a cup of tea.

Kino told him stories from the nearby countries she had visited. The old man was smiling all throughout. He treated Kino to tea and dessert. They split the mountain of crepes between them.

"I think we should get going now," Kino finally said. It was almost lunchtime. The restaurant was beginning to fill up with customers.

"Is that so? Such a shame. Thank you for sharing your stories," the old man said. Kino thanked him as well.

Kino pushed Hermes into the street and started him. The engine began to rumble.

The old man stood, leaning on his cane. Kino nodded to him and put Hermes into gear.

"There you are! Hold it right there, punk!" said a voice. "Yeah, you on the motorrad! The one with the black vest!"

The man Kino had met two days earlier leapt out the doors of a nearby building. Kino cut Hermes' engine.

"Perfect timing. Don't you dare move!"

All eyes were on the man. It was dead quiet. The man strode up to Kino and

Hermes. Kino disembarked and propped up Hermes on his side stand.

“What is it?” she asked, standing before Hermes.

“Unload your motorrad. Put all your stuff on the ground,” the man said from a short distance away.

“Why should I do that?”

“Because I’ll be taking them off your hands. Must be hard traveling with all that junk. I’m helping you lighten up, you hear? I’ll use what I can use and sell off what I don’t need. Gotta get some cash to keep me afloat, yeah?”

“I’m afraid I can’t impose on you like that. I’ll have to decline your offer.”

The man snorted. He flashed the holster on his right side. “I’m only gonna say this one more time. Unload your stuff right here and get lost, or I’ll put a bullet through your skull. I’ll even let you keep the clothes on your back. We got a deal or what?”

The people on the streets began disappearing inside.

“I see you must have decided to settle here,” Kino noted.

“Obviously. I’m a citizen now.”

“But you don’t behave like one.”

The man frowned. “I don’t give a shit. So what’ll it be, punk?”

Kino looked around. There was no one in sight. She saw silhouettes through the windows.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. I was just getting ready to leave.”

“So no negotiations, eh?” the man threatened, spreading his feet and warming up his hands and shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Hermes,” Kino whispered. “I’ll be counting on you for a bit.”

“Fine. Just make sure you patch up the holes later,” Hermes replied.

The man drew his persuader. Kino turned.

“What the hell?” the man spat.

She took cover behind Hermes.

“Ha! Coward! Are your persuaders just for show?” the man taunted, taking aim with a step forward. “You brought this on yourself, kid.”

A crossbow bolt skewered his right arm.

His persuader fell to the ground. The man stared at his arm. A crossbow bolt was sticking out of it. He was bleeding.

“Argh!”

Another bolt. It neatly pierced the top of his right foot, boot and ground and all.

“AAAGH!”

The man writhed in pain, but his foot was pinned and he could not pull out the bolt from his arm.

“DAMMIT! DAMMIT!”

The townspeople began to gather, one by one. They all looked perfectly calm. They all came armed.

A middle-aged man holding a large knife. A young man with a persuader. A young woman with a club. A middle-aged woman with a crossbow, stepping out of a nearby apartment building.

Kino cautiously peered out from behind Hermes.

“What the hell are you?! Goddammit...”

The old man with the cane stepped forward. “We’re only trying to stop you, young man. You tried to do something that we do not tolerate.”

“Wh-what are you talking about, you old fart? Get these things out of me! Dammit!”

“Allow me to answer your question,” the old man said. “You see, we do not tolerate murder in this country.”

“You’re a liar, old man! Murder’s not illegal here! That’s why I came in the first place!”

“And you are absolutely correct. Murder is not illegal, and that is why we are all here.”

People quietly began to voice their agreement.

“Wh-what are you going on about? You’re making no sense! Get these things out of me, or I’ll slaughter you!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. You see, in this country, we kill anyone who has killed, tried to kill, or tries to kill.”

“You just said that murder wasn’t illegal here! Are you senile, old man? It means I’m allowed to kill people!” the man demanded, losing his senses.

The old man continued calmly, “‘Not illegal’ does not mean ‘tolerated’.”

“Don’t make me laugh! Who do you think you are, anyway? What gives you the right to lecture me?”

The old man’s eyes narrowed.

“Who am I, you ask? No one of importance, really. Just an ordinary citizen. An old man named Regel.”

“What...”

The man looked up at Regel, mouth agape.

“My apologies, but you are a danger to us all.”

Regel twisted the top of his cane and pulled. A blade emerged, glinting black in the light.

He put his weight into the blade as he drove it through the man’s heart. Regel twisted once, and drew it back out.

The old man with the cane gently closed the corpse’s eyes. Everyone held a moment of silence.

Kino watched it all from the back.

“It’s always a tragedy when a fellow countryman dies,” someone said. Everyone nodded. Someone asked to make arrangements at the national cemetery, and another person volunteered.

And everyone went back to their business.

Regel walked up to Kino. “Take care.”

"I will," Kino replied, starting Hermes. The roar of his engine filled the streets.

The old man stood, leaning on his cane. Kino nodded to him and put Hermes into gear.

A motorrad was traveling west along a road cutting through the plains and the lakes. The surface of the water reflected the motorrad and the rider and the sky.

"Look, Kino. A horse," the motorrad said without warning.

Kino narrowed her eyes and looked ahead. "I see it. And a person, too." She took her left hand off the handle and checked the persuader behind her back. She then switched hands to check the revolver on her right thigh. "We're stopping for a bit, Hermes."

A fully-laden horse stood drinking water by the road, at the edge of the lake. The sound of the engine woke up the man who had been lying next to it with a hat over his face.

The man was in his twenties, dressed in riding pants and boots with a light jacket. A .45 caliber automatic hand persuader was holstered at his right side.

He waved at the incoming motorrad.

"Hi there," the man said when Kino stopped Hermes.

Kino disembarked without shutting off the engine, and propped up Hermes on his side stand. "Hello." "Hi."

The man asked, "Are you from the country to the east?"

"No," Kino replied, "I'm a traveler. I stayed at the country for three days and left just now."

"I see... Could I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

The man said, downcast, "I came all this way because I heard from a traveler that the country over there is safe and full of polite people." He paused. "Is it true?"

"Yes, it is," Kino replied.

The man was uplifted.

“Although it depends on your standards,” Kino added.

“My standards?” the man asked. “The place I come from was awful. No sense of security, with people getting killed every day. I had to kill countless people in order to survive. I’m sure they must have wanted normal lives too, but they had no other choice. I left my homeland because I don’t want to kill anyone anymore. I want to live in a safe country.”

“Really? Then you’ll like the country over there. Look for an old man named Regel. Tell him about your travels and he’ll help you out.”

“Thank you,” said the man.

Kino then asked the man about the countries to the west and how to get there. The man gave her as much information as he could.

Thanking the man, Kino started Hermes.

“Oh, I wanted to ask one more thing...” the man said hesitantly. “I heard a strange rumor about that country from another place I visited. If you know anything about it, could you tell me?”

“How did the rumor go?” asked Kino.

The man thought for a moment, but eventually shook his head.

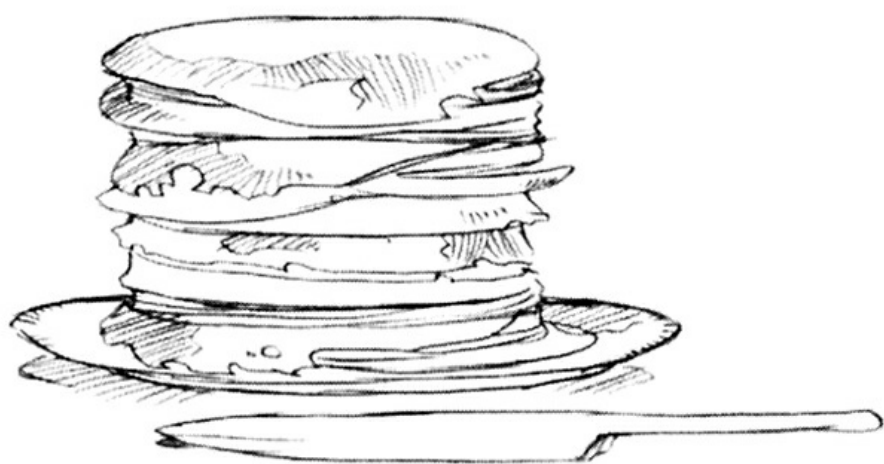
“Never mind. It’s a stupid question. I mean, it’s kind of crazy, if you think about it. I’ll go see for myself when I get there.”

“All right. If you’ll excuse us, then.”

“Yeah. Take care of yourself.”

Once the motorrad had disappeared into the distance, the man climbed onto his horse. He began to ride eastward.

“I wonder if it’s true,” he mumbled from atop the saddle, bobbing up and down with each step the horse took, “that they serve piles of crepes by the plateful.”





Chapter 3: The Story of a Store -For Sale-

Manager's log vol. 25

Day 3,094 (Sunny)

No customers today, either.

The 'pumpkins' from a customer long ago finally ripened. Never seen them before, but carefully carved one up and steamed it, as customer said to.

Pumpkin was sweet. Delicious enough to plant again. They say pumpkins are quite good fried, too.

Day 3,095 (Sunny, then cloudy)

No customers today, either.

Sat around minding the store and reading.

Finished 'The Melancholy of Ulericks' today. Good read.

Day 3,096 (Rainy)

No customers today, either.

Couldn't do the laundry because it rained all day.

The steamed pumpkin in the pot has started to go bad surprisingly quickly.

Day 3,097 (Sunny)

No customers today, either.

In good spirits thanks to sunny weather.

Did the wash and hung up the clothes to dry, but dropped a shirt and had to wash it again to get the mud off it.

Considered paving the strip under the hanger, but the moles and the worms wouldn't appreciate that.

Day 3,098 (Sunny)

No customers today, either.

Did the usual rounds, checking the merchandise. Everything in order. Store is always ready for customers.

Read to pass the time afterwards.

Day 3,099 (Cloudy, then sunny)

No customers today, either.

Put up the 'PLEASE RING BELL FOR SERVICE' sign early on and went to the river behind the store to do some fishing.

Hauled in five, including both small and large. Loosed the small ones back in the river.

Had meunière for dinner for the first time in a while.

Day 3,100 (Cloudy)

No customers today, either.

Fixed up the generator (acting up all morning) and cleaned the store as usual. Must always keep the premises spic-and-span.

Thought to smoke the rest of the fish from yesterday, but not enough left. Had leftovers for dinner instead.

Day 3,101 (Cloudy)

No customers today, either.

Did regular checkups on the instruments. Tilting slightly to the minus side, but decently within range. Will do another round in 40 days.

Thawed out a chunk of meat from the fridge.

Day 3,102 (Sunny)

Had a customer for first time in 79 days. Record today will be long for once.

Excellent weather all morning. Hung up the sheets to dry and opened shop with a smile.

Had the feeling someone might show up today. Maybe it's a sixth sense. Will test out later.

The customer came in just before noon, while I was wondering what to have

for lunch. I heard an engine getting closer and closer and rushed out the door.

It was a young traveler on a motorrad passing through the plains. I called out and the traveler stopped, curious.

Traveling on a motorrad sounded fascinating. A flying motorrad might be more comfortable, but an overheated lifter means certain death for anyone without the right know-how. A regular motorrad is safer.

The traveler—named Kino—was in a white shirt and a black vest. It was a strange ensemble. Kino told me that the vest was actually a jacket with detachable sleeves, and could be worn in all weather conditions.

I nodded. It was certainly important to travel light.

I invited Kino and the motorrad—Hermes—into the store. I offered a seat and some tea.

As expected of a seasoned traveler, Kino asked what was in the tea. I drank it first to prove that it was safe.

Kino apologized for being suspicious, but I did not mind. I've heard about thieves who spike drinks to rob travelers of their valuables. You can never be too careful.

"Welcome to my store," I said. And I asked Kino and Hermes if they wanted me to describe my merchandise.

"Before that, could I ask you a few things about the store?" Kino asked. I nodded. I was happy that someone took an interest in my establishment.

"Thank you. Why did you set up shop in a place like this?"

"Yeah. You won't get a lot of customers smack-dab in the middle of an empty plain. We were surprised when we saw this place."

Kino and Hermes were right to be curious. There is nothing around here but plains and woods and lakes. It takes more than a few days to reach the closest country, no matter what vehicle you take.

"And are you the only one who works here? No one else?" Hermes asked.

I answered the questions one by one. I explained that I set up shop here

because I love the location. I had always wanted to live in my own store, so I wanted to find a place I wanted to live in, which turned out to be this area. But I did not tell them that I had no home to return to because the bullheaded folks there were completely opposed to this shop.

I explained how I had brought in my precious merchandise and tools by truck and built this building and set up shop. That I had no family, and that I had no idea what my parents were doing now.

I don't know if Kino and Hermes understood me completely.

"Do you get customers?" Kino asked.

"Yes. About once every hundred days, on average. All travelers or merchants. My wares do attract a lot of attention."

Which was not a lie.

"Have you sold anything so far?" Hermes asked. I did not lie this time, either.

"No. Not a single thing."

People have conflicting philosophies about embellishing products to make a sale. I am a terrible liar, so I decided I would only tell the truth about my merchandise. And I will continue to do so.

"Let me show you one of my finest products," I told them, bringing the smallest model I have—the No.5—to the table.

The best way to learn about an object is to see it right before your eyes. And the best stores are the ones that let customers look at and touch the products. So I put it on the table. I strive every day to meet the highest standards in customer service.

The hardware store in the eastern district back home was terrible, in that sense. With tools, you have to feel the balance in your hand to see if they're worth the price. But everything there was in a glass case and the shopkeeper only took things out if you wanted to buy them.

I still clearly remember how I stormed out of these.

I also remember how I swore I would never do such a thing if I had a store of my own, but how it all seemed so far away at the time.

If Kino doesn't feel the same frustration I felt back then, it means I'm capable of taking away lessons from bad experiences. That thought made me a little happy.

"What is this?" Kino asked, examining the product.

"What does it look like?" I asked, showing just the right amount of playfulness so as to avoid annoying the customer. There is nothing more fun than presenting a product you've personally made.

"A normal navy-colored suitcase. It doesn't have any buckles, but it has a switch," Hermes said.

"Precisely. It looks just like an ordinary suitcase, which is the point. But actually—" I paused. Hold the pause too long and the customer gets impatient and leaves, but a short one creates dramatic tension. "It's a high-power bomb."

As expected, Kino and Hermes stared (although I wasn't sure with Hermes, as he has no eyes) in utter shock.

As the book says, 'Products that function differently from the way they appear are perfect for attracting attention. Develop items that can capture people's imaginations!'

"A bomb? You mean you sell bombs and weapons here?" Kino asked.

"Yes. I sell high-power bombs, and nothing else. This is a high-power bomb specialty store. And let me tell you, you won't find products like mine anywhere else. Just in terms of raw power, even just one of these bombs—"

I was getting tongue-tied. I was anxious because it had been so long since the last time I had a customer. After all that practice, too. It was a little embarrassing.

"Pardon me. Even just one of these bombs could level the biggest of countries. The heat and energy it releases will disintegrate, break, and burn everyone and everything aboveground. It also releases a powerful poison into the air that will take care of all survivors and people who happen to visit the blast site. It guarantees a slow and painful death."

"How does it work?" Hermes asked.

“Just like the sun, essentially. Nuclear fusion.”

I had the answers memorized.

Hermes was the first customer to ever understand from that explanation alone. I simplified it a little more so Kino would also understand. Although I’m not sure how much Kino took away from it.

In either case, Kino made sure to remember the names of the products, if nothing else.

“And you mean that you made this ‘hydrogen bomb’ that can level an entire country in one blast?”

“Yes.”

“On your own?”

“That’s right.”

I answered every question without a moment of hesitation, as a good shopkeeper should. I was on fire. I decided to get a little more in-depth.

“I thought up the concept when I still lived back home, and gave the concept a whirl. I succeeded, but no one in my home country wanted my inventions. So I decided to leave my country to set up shop. Today is the 3,120th day since I opened this store.”

“Have you ever thought of using these yourself?” Kino asked.

“Never. There aren’t any countries or people I want to get rid of. I’m just happy to be able to make the things I want. It’s only natural for people to make things they want to make or use the things they want to use, don’t you think? As the maker of these fine products, I would be very pleased if someone who wanted them were to purchase and use them,” I replied. The same answer I will always give when someone asks me this question. “Kino. Hermes. What do you say? This hydrogen bomb will prove immensely useful to you in your journey. For example, you could annihilate a country that displeases you, or you could create a new lake out there in the wilderness. You could even drag in innocent people and animals if you ever felt like committing suicide.”

As the book says, ‘Honesty is key to building good rapport. If you are

confident in your products, promote them with your head held high.'

"They're on sale at the moment. Buy one, and get another product of the same or greater firepower for no additional charge. Both products come with timers with a range of three seconds to a hundred days. I also offer a free paint job and a name engraving service."

As the book says, 'Add value to your product to give your customer the last little push they need to be convinced that this is the product for them.'

"I have full confidence in my range of products, and I test them out regularly. If one or both units are found to not be in full working order, or if you're not satisfied with the scale of the explosion, you can get your money back."

As the book says, 'Customer care is essential to breeding trust.'

Kino fell into thought.

"How much?" Hermes asked. An understandable question.

I gave the usual answer. "You name the price! I even accept bartering."

For some reason, Kino seemed to be deep in thought. But with a shake of the head, Kino eventually replied, "I'm afraid that we don't need a hydrogen bomb at the moment. I'll have to decline."

I admit, it was disappointing to hear.

But I reminded myself that the best thing for the products is for them to be purchased by someone who truly wants them. It is only natural that someone who does not want a product does not buy it.

Afterwards, Kino offered to buy or barter for food. I offered what I had for no charge. Vegetables that kept for a long time, jerky from the ox I butchered, and sealed containers of boiled water. It was only a fraction of what I had in the storehouse, but Kino thanked me profusely.

"Not at all. It's the least I could do for someone who's come to browse the store," I said. And I added, "If you ever need a hydrogen bomb, you're welcome to visit any time."

Afterwards, I told Kino about the countries in the area and the road there.

It was just about lunchtime. I asked Kino and Hermes to join me for lunch. I grilled the meat I set out to thaw, and shared it with Kino. It had been a long time since I ate with someone else.

After lunch, Kino thanked me again for the food I shared and headed west on Hermes.

Once they were gone, I cleaned the store and moved around the displays while I was at it.

What if I put one of the units on an eye-catching shelf? That way, anyone who sets foot inside will see it immediately.

Then I'll have to reinforce the shelf. I'll do that tomorrow.

It has been a long time since I wrote such a long log entry. My fingers hurt from all the typing.

Today was a fulfilling day. It's sad that nothing sold, but there was nothing I could do to change Kino's mind. Getting a customer is in and of itself something to be happy about.

All I can do is hope the next customer decides to buy something.

Addendum: Boiled the remainder of the meat. Was delicious.

Day 3,103 (Sunny)

No customers today, either.

Never had customers two days in a row. Never will.

That is not reason enough to close shop.

Reinforced shelf and displayed No.3 painted in favorite color—blue.

Putting products on shelves makes store layout appealing. Will keep this arrangement for time being.

Had meat-and-vegetable stir fry for lunch. Ate leftovers for dinner.





Chapter 4: The Heroes' Country -No Hero-

Breath puffing into the air, Kino unloaded her things from Hermes. She was wearing her hat and black jacket with a pair of goggles on her eyes. Cannon was holstered to her thigh.

She opened her suitcase. A dismantled rifle-type persuader was secured to the inside of the lid.

"I can't believe you get to use it already, Kino."

"Yeah. I wish it didn't have to be this soon."

The rifle was in two parts—front and back. The back consisted of a wooden stock and a scope, and the front was a metallic black frame with a long cylinder.

"I count seven of them."

"Thanks."

Kino put together the halves of the rifle and secured them together. She hooked the leather strap on the back half to the front, and took out a shoulder bag from one of Hermes' compartments. Taking out a nine-round magazine from inside the bag, Kino loaded it into the rifle.

"By the way, what're you gonna call it?"

"Flute," she replied, operating the bolt. The first round was chambered. Slinging the bag crossways, Kino secured it to her belt to keep it from dangling. She then took out a spare magazine for Cannon. "Hermes."

"Hm?"

"If I don't come back, find yourself a new rider."

"Okay. I'd prefer not to switch owners, though."

Kino placed a hand on Cannon, which was still holstered. "I'll try." She put the spare magazine in her pocket.

"In case you don't come back—bye, Kino."

"Yeah. Bye."

“Good luck. No need to pick up any souvenirs for me,” Hermes said without an ounce of worry.

“Yeah. I’ll be back,” Kino replied with a grim smile.

Slowly, Kino peered out the corner.

She was taking cover behind an arch that led into a courtyard surrounded by identical houses. Hermes was parked discreetly in the courtyard.

Heavy clouds hung in the sky. Cold gusts battered the streets from time to time.

The three-story brick houses stood in the deserted city, their windows shattered. Weeds that had sprouted between the paving stones lay limp and withered on the ground.

Kino rushed out and sprinted to the building across the street.

She took cover by the stairs to the front door; a bullet narrowly missed her. Flying faster than the speed of sound, it tore through the air with a monstrous noise.

“There,” Kino mumbled, eyes on the man with the rifle across the street.

She turned and disappeared behind the building.

“Missed. He’s fast,” said the tall man.

“He’s young. Must’ve ditched the motorrad... He’s got a rifle. Watch yourselves,” said the man with the binoculars. The others nodded.

There were seven men in all. A bald man, a short man, a bearded man, a muscular man, a man wearing a hat, a tall, skinny man, and a man with a large backpack.

All were over the age of fifty and wearing messy patched-up outfits. They wore thick navy pants and jackets, and belts with magazine pouches around their waists and chests. The bald man had a holstered hand persuader at his right side.

The men were all equipped with manual bolt-action rifle-type persuaders with wooden stocks.

The tall man, who had just opened fire, operated the bolt with an expert hand. His was the only persuader equipped with a scope.

The bald man said, "After him."

The men held their persuaders at waist-level as they made their way forward, hugging the walls on either side of the street.

They passed the courtyard where Hermes was parked and quietly peered into the alley Kino had rushed into. There was no cover.

The bald man gestured with his left hand. The others followed his order, covering one another in pairs as they moved forward.

They made it out of the narrow alley and emerged into the next street, which looked little different from the previous one. There was no one there.

Taking the lead was the man in the hat. He noticed indistinct footprints in the ground, and returned to the others taking cover in the alley. "He's headed east," he reported to the bald man.

"East? The streets are wide there. Not much cover," said the man with the backpack.

"But he doesn't know that," the short man laughed. "Perfect."

"No. He's going downwind. Making sure we don't pick up on his noise, and he picks up all the sound we make," said the tall man. A gust of wind blew into the alley and created a small tornado, kicking up dust.

The men breathed silently and exchanged glances.

The bald man nodded several times. "Don't let your guard down. He's more clever than he looks. He'll try to make a run for it through the eastern gate. Kill him on sight."

"Okay." "Right," the others responded tensely.

The street lined with residences led due east. It forked left and right just ahead of a park dotted with dead trees.

The men split up into two teams and stalked along the buildings. They could see the park in the distance.

The man in the hat was in the lead, following the trail of footsteps. He had his persuader held ready at waist-level.

Quietly, the men pressed on. They could clearly make out the withered trees as they neared the park. The man in the hat suddenly stopped. He held up his left fist, and the others stopped on high alert. The two at the very back turned and prepared to open fire at a moment's notice.

The man in the hat scrutinized the footprints.

They stopped abruptly in front of him. There was no sign that their target had jumped, or any signs of places someone could jump onto.

He took four slow steps backwards. Placing his own foot over his own footprint, he compared the depths of the marks they had left behind. Then he turned and cautiously walked back. The other men watched in complete silence.

When he looked up, he found himself before a dark alley. The entrance was blocked by a mound of collapsed roof tiles.

The man in the hat took aim at the alley.

His right thigh burst, scattering flesh and blood into the air.

“Gah!”

The silence was broken by his scream and the sound of his body hitting the floor.

“He’s sniping!” cried the muscular man, who had been taking cover behind a wall. The others plastered themselves against the walls and got to the ground. The man who had been shot twisted, lying on his back and pressing on his thigh. Blood gushed between his fingers.

“Where’s he shooting from?!” the bald man demanded.

Grimacing, the man in the hat raised his right hand to point at their target. A second shot smashed into his left kneecap.

“Agh!”

The man writhed and rolled over onto his stomach. Both legs were bleeding,

and he was trembling.

“Damn it! Where is he?!”

“I didn’t hear any shots!”

“Where’s he shooting from?”

The men clung to the walls, looking straight ahead.

Kino peered into Flute’s scope from next to the collapsed roof tiles. The cylinder from earlier was stuck near the muzzle of the persuader, muffling most of the noise.

Through the scope, she could see the thoroughfare outside the dark, narrow alley. And the man lying there.

His mouth opened.

“AAAAARGH!”

The man on the ground screamed. His arms twitched in an attempt to drag the rest of him to safety, but could not muster the strength.

“Hold on, I’m coming!” the muscular man cried, putting down his persuader and unbuckling his magazine belts. And he rushed forward to save his friend.

Kino adjusted her aim. She opened fire.

“Stop!” the bearded man bellowed. The muscular man lost half his head, which landed on the ground like a crushed tomato. Arms outstretched towards his friend, he crumpled forward with a thud. And he stopped moving.

The tall man noted which way the blood and brains had spilled. “He’s on the right! Not ahead! The alley!”

“Smoke canisters!” the bald man ordered. The others lit their smoke canisters and flung them.

The canisters hit the wall by the alley and landed, spewing thick purple smoke.

A second before the smoke grew any thicker, Kino fired once at the writhing man’s stomach. Then she picked up the four empty cartridges next to her and took off.

Soon, the gusts blew away the purple smoke.

The tall man took aim at the alley. But their target was already gone.

The bald man knelt by the man in the hat.

His legs and stomach were already drenched in blood. The man with the backpack desperately tried to stop his bleeding, to no avail. Steam rose from the blood.

“Sorry...I messed up...”

“Enough. Save your strength,” said the bald man.

“No. It’s over... I can’t...see...”

The man in the hat died with eyes wide open, tears streaming down his face.

The bald man gently closed his friend’s eyes and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small, round pendant marked with a star and undid the chain, sliding it into his own breast pocket.

Without a word, the bearded man held out the muscular man’s pendant. The bald man took this one as well and gingerly put it into his pocket. The two chains clinked quietly inside.

The two bodies were laid out on the paving stones with cloth covering their faces.

“We’ll give ‘em a proper burial later. Once we’ve killed the target,” said the bald man.

The man with the backpack scanned the area, persuader at the ready. “He’s using a highly accurate and advanced model. An automatic type equipped with a suppressor.”

“If only we had some of those,” the short man said, nodding.

“No use dwelling on what-ifs,” the bald man said mechanically. “We’ll make do with the weapons we have.”

Taking out a map, the bald man opened it up and weighed it down to keep it from getting blown away. The map was growing discolored with age, but perfectly depicted the cylinder-shaped country in detail.

Several streets ran eastward in parallel, and at the end of those streets was a long park. Beyond the park was another residential district almost identical to the others, but it had been crossed out in pen with the words 'RUINS'.

"You think he'll try to run?" asked the short man.

"No. If I were him, I'd be taking cover in the area to pick off the rest of us. He probably doesn't want to leave the motorrad behind, but he can't take off on it because the engine'll give away his position," the bearded man explained.

The man with the backpack asked, "Then you think he's crossed the park? To the ruins?"

The bald man fell into thought, scanning the map. He eventually shook his head. "Not that far. Probably just ahead of it. We're on his tail—didn't give him enough time to escape the park. He's probably hiding in a building on the edge of the ruins, biding time before getting us all from behind, whether it's on the street or the park."

The tall man nodded, still on high alert. "That's what I'd do in his shoes. If that really is an automatic he's got, he could kill us all in one go."

"We'll split into two teams," said the bald man, "And check all the balconies from either end of the park. We'll catch him by surprise."

"I'm bored," Hermes mumbled.

The courtyard was deserted, save for the sound of broken window frames and fallen laundry hangers squeaking in the wind.

"This is so boring," Hermes said, when he heard gunshots in the distance. "Oh. Did they get Kino?"

Another round of gunfire followed.

"Oh. Not yet."

"They're better than I expected," Kino muttered, running down the stairs.

The short man and the man with the backpack opened fire on the third-floor balcony she had been hiding on.

Reaching the first floor, Kino passed the living room and kicked open the front

door. Bullets struck where she had been a moment earlier, leaving two holes and a spray of wooden splinters.

“Two on the right... They’ve split up.”

Kino was on the eastern corner, in the house at the end of the row lining the park. Just outside the open door was the park and a road running from north to south.

“I’m done for if they manage a pincer attack. Better push through the side with fewer people...”

Heading to the south side of the house, Kino discovered a dusty frosted-glass window in the bathroom. She gently pushed it open and made her way into the courtyard, passed an arch, and headed for the corner of the east-west thoroughfare. Then she got down, clinging to Flute so she could open fire at a moment’s notice.

Kino looked out in the direction of the park. Across the way was the entrance to another courtyard, and to her immediate left was the road that followed the park, and an intersection.

At the corner of the building across the road, she spotted the muzzle of a rifle. And the face of the short man.

The second she ducked, a bullet came shooting at her. It hit the ground and bounced off.

Kino rose and hefted Flute on her back. Pulling out Cannon, she left the cover of the street corner and pulled the trigger without taking aim.

The bullet disappeared into the park, but the men shrank at the noise.

Immediately, she switched hands and took out a flask from her satchel. It was for medicine, but she had filled it with green gunfluid. A short fuse stuck out of the mouth.

Kino opened fire to light the fuse. The shot drove a hole in the courtyard wall.

Swinging wide, Kino tossed the flask far into the air. It slowly crossed the road and clattered to the ground near the corner of the building.

Immediately, Kino got back and ducked, covering her ears and opening her

mouth.

“Grenade!” cried the short man, who had been taking aim from the corner on his knees. “Get down!” he got up and pushed his friend to the ground. Then he ducked as well, pointing his feet at the corner.

The flask exploded.

White smoke spewed endlessly from the explosion, swallowing the intersection.

The three men walking north along the parkside road towards the battle spotted the cloud. A second later, they heard a dull thud.

“Is it him?” asked the bearded man.

The tall man looked into his scope. The white smoke began clearing and he spotted someone moving in the crosshairs. Two men were about to get up from the ground.

“The guys are alive.”

“Then we regroup,” said the bald man. “It’s dangerous outside. We’ll cut through the courtyard and join them. Kill the intruder on sight.”

The men crept into a nearby alley. And one by one, they passed through a courtyard and out of a building.

The tall man watched the south side, and the bearded man the north.

The paving stones were stained black by the blast, and the buildings were crumbling a little more. Almost every window in the area had shattered.

The bald man found their two collapsed friends and checked them for injuries before sitting them up. Then he pulled them over to lean them against the buildings.

“You all right?”

The man with the backpack shook his head. Dust fell from his hair as he coughed. “My ears are ringing! Otherwise I’m fine!”

“I can still fight. I can fight,” said the short man. He was covered in scrapes, and a trickle of blood ran down his cheek. The ends of his pant legs were slightly

singed.

“I see.” The bald man held out a water bottle to the man with the backpack.

“Where’d he go...? Is he dead?” asked the short man, wiping the blood off his face.

The bald man shook his head. “No. I can’t say for sure because all this dust covered his track, but he probably used the explosion as a decoy to run south through the courtyard. He must’ve seen the pincer attack coming.”

“Damn it...” the short man groaned. There was a cut in his mouth and blood was running down his lip. The man with the backpack handed him the water bottle.

The short man spat out a mouthful of water and blood.

“I see him,” said the tall man. “He’s trying to escape the park.” He was sitting with his knees in front of him, either elbow on either knee with the scope of his rifle pressed to his eye.

Everyone turned. The bald man peered through his binoculars.

The park was overrun with dry grass and weeds. Further south, they could see someone running. To the naked eye, the figure was the size of a grain of rice, but through the binoculars, it was clear enough to clearly make out the rifle.

“He’s far. Can you get him?” asked the bald man.

Without a word, the tall man wrapped the leather strap around his left shoulder to secure his rifle and steadied the crosshairs over the running target. He aimed a little ahead and higher than the target and pulled the trigger.

The gun roared. The men looked at the target. The target was still running.

The tall man deftly loaded another round and fired. The target was still running.

Then the third shot. A gust of wind kicked up dust around them.

Then the fourth. The target was still running.

The fifth. The target fell forward just before it could escape the park.

“Did you get him?” asked the man with the backpack.

“No. He ducked,” said the bald man, still looking through the binoculars.

The short man asked, “But why?”

“GET DOWN!” cried the bald man. He spotted the target taking aim.

The men hit the ground at once.

The tall man, however, unloaded the last casing and remained seated.

Kino pretended to fall when she heard the fifth shot, and lay on her stomach on a slight, grassy hill in the park.

She aimed Flute and peered into the scope, and saw the men ducking. With the exception of the one who had been firing on her until a moment ago.

Kino took aim at the man. He was far, and there was a strong wind. She moved the crosshairs diagonally above the man.

Then she opened fire. And again.

They heard no gunshots, only the sound of bullets cutting through the air. And the crumbling of paving stones and roof tiles around them.

Four men lay on their stomachs with their hands over their heads. The tall man alone sat with his empty persuader at the ready, glaring at the shooter through his scope.

He stared in complete silence.

Flute’s bolt came to a full stop once the nine-round magazine had been emptied.

The man in the scope remained seated, unmoving.

“Missed... I thought I’d make at least one shot.”

Quickly, Kino got up and ran the short distance out of the park with the still-smoking Flute in her arms.

Soon she was in the thoroughfare.

Before Kino’s eyes were mounds of collapsed roof tiles.

“After him. Scatter longways and cross the park, and make sure to avoid getting in front of him. There is no high ground in the ruins ahead—make sure

you're on alert," the bald man ordered.

The others looked up. Their crow's feet deepened as they shot fiery glares at their target's direction.

"Let's go."

The short man, his face a grizzled mess, tapped on the tall man. He was still sitting frozen.

"Hey..." said the tall man. A droplet of sweat ran down his cheek.

"What's up?"

The tall man reached into his satchel and took out five rounds.

"He's mine..." he muttered, loading the rounds into his rifle one after another. "I'll get him..."

"Right," the short man said with a nod, helping his friend up as the latter finished loading.

"I swear, he's mine," the tall man seethed.

"Yeah. Let's go."

The tall man followed the others from the back.

Little by little, blood began to soak the side of his jacket.

After the explosion had come five gunshots. Then silence.

"Are they still fighting? They're actually giving Kino some trouble. Or maybe it's the other way around," Hermes grumbled. "I'm so bored. Not that I mind being under a roof in this weather. It's getting cold. What's Kino going to do if it starts snowing? I don't want to slip and slide around everywhere..."

"There he is," the man with the backpack hissed.

The roofs of the houses lining the street had caved in, spilling tiles onto the ground. They lay in mounds littering the street, creating obstacles for any would-be explorer. The men were taking cover at the end of a pile that was the height of a fully-grown adult.

"Hey," the short man said to the tall man, pointing at a gap in the wall to their

left. “I’ll lure him out. I’ll run over to that hole, so take care of him when he pokes his head out. I don’t care if I lose an arm or two this time.” He grinned.

The bald man and the tall man exchanged glances and nodded.

The tall man crept up to the top of the mound of tiles and slowly positioned his persuader—and his head—for a shot. “I’ll get him this time, I swear...”

“All right!”

The short man leapt out of cover, running for the hole in the wall. Tiles crunched beneath his feet. At the same time, the tall man pushed himself up and spotted their enemy, head poking out on the other side.

But their foe was not taking aim at the short man.

By the time the tall man had risen to find their target, the target had already finished taking aim. At him.

The tall man ground his teeth.

Kino opened fire.

The bullet went from her persuader to the top of the mound in the blink of an eye, piercing the tall man’s wide-open left eye and punching out the back of his head.

The short man reached the safety of the hole in the wall, and turned to find his friend falling in a mess of blood.

“Goddammit! The bastard!” he cried. He leaned out of cover and took aim, when the enemy shot the rifle out of his hands. A second shot grazed his right arm, leaving a gash.

The short man leapt back into cover. “There! Behind the car, below you to the left!”

His friends spotted a car over the mound of tiles. It had been abandoned on the street and crushed under a pile of bricks. The bald man gave it a quick peek before returning to cover. “We can get him with a grenade. Distance is eighty.”

The man with the backpack took off the backpack and took out a rifle grenade. The cylinder affixed to the front contained gunpowder, and slender

wings were attached to the thinner part at the back.

The man opened his rifle and loaded a special blank with a wooden warhead. Then he secured the grenade to the end of the barrel and raised the gun sight on the side.

“He’s straight ahead,” said the bald man.

The man with the backpack nodded and pulled the pin. Then he propped up the rifle by its stock, took aim with the sight, and pulled the trigger.

There was an explosive noise. The grenade was launched.

Kino reacted instantly. She leapt out from cover and had run about six steps to the right when the explosion hit.

The bearded man looked at the short man across the way and gave him a thumbs-down. The short man shook his head. “To the side! Your left!”

“One more shot. Further left,” the bald man said.

The man with the backpack deftly loaded another blank and the grenade.

He took aim and fired.

Kino was flat against the ground. She rose again, dusting herself off, and took a seat on the mound of tiles. The car had taken the full force of the blast, its windows shattered and body crumpled beyond recognition.

The moment she heard the second shot, Kino took aim. She spotted a dark object flying across the cloudy sky.

Without even looking into the scope, Kino used the metal gun sight and pointed Flute at the object. She pulled the trigger.

There was an explosion in midair. It left behind a cloud of black smoke and scattered shrapnel everywhere.

“What happened?” demanded the man with the backpack.

“He shot it down!” the short man replied, still in cover.

The bearded man was incredulous. “What in the world is he?”

“Damn it,” the short man hissed. His rifle lay on a mound of tiles.

He leaned out slightly to survey the area, and was fired upon. One bullet left a long graze on his cheek and smashed into a brick.

“Shit!”

The man rushed back into cover.

Her aim still trained on her foes, Kino reloaded Flute with her left hand. When she gave her head a light shake, tiny pieces of rubble fell from her hat.

“I’ll do it,” said the bearded man.

The others turned. Across the street was the short man, still in cover and wrapping up his injured right arm with his left hand and mouth.

“Give me the rest of the explosives. I can’t let him kill any more of us. I’ll try and persuade him.”

There was a moment of silence before the bald man finally responded, “But why does it have to be you?”

The bearded man grinned. “Because I’m the oldest here. And you’ll respect your elders if you know what’s good for you.”

“...Fine,” the bald man sighed, pulling out a shoulder satchel from the backpack. Inside were four box-shaped explosives.

The man with the backpack pulled out a cigarette-shaped object with a long string dangling from it. A fuse. “You’ll get seven seconds to detonation.”

“Right.”

The bearded man received the fuse and, with a careful hand, reached to stick it in the explosives. But he paused.

“Here.” He took the pendant off his neck and held it out to the bald man. “I’ll come back for it.”

“Yeah.”

The bearded man placed his pendant on the bald man’s outstretched hand. He squeezed his hand, and the hand of the man with the backpack.

The bearded man stuck the fuse into the explosives and hung the satchel from his neck. He threw it back over his shoulder to conceal it from the target and

slipped the strap into his shirt.

Then he roared. “I want to negotiate!”

Hands raised above his head, the bearded man slowly rose from behind the mound of tiles.

The short man paled when he saw his friend rise, but quickly understood what was happening.

The bearded man began walking across the roof tiles, but was not fired upon.

Taking cautious steps, the bearded man slowly passed the hole in the wall when the short man was hiding.

“I want to negotiate!”

The voice was carried on the wind, clear enough for Kino to hear.

She cast a glance at the hole in the wall before taking aim at the man walking with his hands in the air.

“I want to negotiate!”

The bearded man was halfway to Kino.

“You can negotiate from where you are now. Freeze,” said the target, just loud enough for the bearded man to hear.

“I just want to talk! I’ve left my persuaders! I’m coming over now!” he cried, refusing to stop.

“I can hear you just fine. Please stop.”

The bearded man ignored the target.

“Please stop, or I will open fire,” the target said when the man was two-thirds of the way there.

The bearded man could see his target taking aim. A young person in a hat and goggles.

The bearded man grinned. He broke into a run, screaming, grabbing the satchel behind his back and the string hanging out of it.

“AAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

The first round struck him in the gut. The second pierced his lung.

But the man refused to stop. He charged, pulling the string. His right hand swung and hurled the satchel with all his strength.

The second the satchel left his hand, it was struck by a third shot. The satchel fell limp to the ground, stopped in its tracks.

It landed in front of the bearded man, who had rolled for cover.

“DAMN YOU!” he yelled, getting up with the satchel in his arms. He lunged.

Kino did not fire a fourth shot. She turned.

She ran at full speed, avoiding the crumbling edges of the buildings.

There was an explosion.

The force of the blast rushed down the streets. The ground shook and buildings began to collapse.

As clouds of dust began to rise, the short man leapt out of his hiding place. The wall he had taken cover under soon crumbled.

The dust obscured everything on the street from view.

The impact of the blast even rattled Hermes.

“Oh, it’s an earthquake,” he mumbled. “What do you think, was that a 1.5? We advise all viewers in coastal areas to be on the lookout for tsunamis. We will bring you more information as soon as it becomes available...” he joked to himself, and sighed. “I’m so bored.”

A gust of wind blew in, clearing their view.

“Did he get him?” the bald man wondered, looking up at the now-even taller mounds of tiles. A building came half-crumbling.

He searched for his friends. The man with the backpack was on his left, and the short man was lying on his stomach on a mound of tiles ahead. Both rose, shaking debris off themselves. He heard coughing.

The bald man spotted something as he helped his friends up.

“Did he get him?” asked the man with the backpack.

“Dunno yet,” the bald man replied, holding out his discovery for the others to see. A right boot, containing a leg from the calf down.

They recognized the boot.

“No sign of him.”

The short man was in the lead, holding his rifle at waist-level as he crossed the mounds of tiles. Behind him was the bald man, whose rifle and scope were trained ahead.

“From a blast that big, there might not be anything left of him,” the man with the backpack suggested. His rifle was already equipped with another grenade.

“You never know.” “Yeah.”

The men passed the epicenter of the explosion. Organs were splattered on the wall next to it. They pressed forward.

“Here! I see blood!” cried the short man. The bald man followed, never once letting his guard down.

There was a small pool of blood. Thumb-sized droplets led away from them, further down the street.

“Good. He’s lost a lot of blood,” said the short man.

“Depends on where he’s hurt. But we know for sure that he didn’t get out of this one unscathed,” the bald man said mechanically. “Let’s go.”

The blood trail led eastward.

Soon, the men were out of the half-collapsing neighborhood. Before their eyes were low, fallen metal fences. Beyond that, a dirt field flanked by a large concrete structure. It was a three-story building with many windows.

“He’s gone into the school,” said the short man.

The three men were taking cover behind two cars left abandoned on the road by the fence. The blood trail led past the fence and cut directly across the school grounds.

“You think he’s waiting for us in there?” wondered the man with the backpack.

“Will a grenade reach him from here? How many shots have you got left?” the bald man asked from near the ground, surveying the school with his binoculars.

“Five. Distance-wise, it’s a little risky. I’ll have to aim from near the ground.”

“We’ll accept his invitation. I’ll distract him, so stay back here even if he gets me. Fire off four shots into whichever classroom he’s hiding in. Got that?”

“Yeah.” “Yeah,” the two men said, nodding.

“I’m sorry,” Kino said. Her hands were covered in blood.

It was still overcast outside.

With his rifle at the ready, the bald man took one step after another across the grounds. There was nothing he could use for cover.

From either sides of the cars on the road, the remaining men stared at their sights with fingers hooked on their triggers. Taking deep breaths, they glared up at the half-shattered windows.

Gunshots.

Four shots from the building, followed by the sound of whizzing bullets.

The bald man immediately ducked. “Second floor! Third class from the right!”

The short man and the man with the backpack quickly took aim. They spotted the barrel of a persuader sticking out of a broken window. The source of the gunshot. The bullets flew clear over the cars and disappeared into the city.

Two grenades were launched in unison.

They drew a gentle arc in the air, smashing through windows and flying into the classroom. Then they exploded.

Every window in the room shattered, sending shards of glass spraying across the balcony.

“Next!” “Right!”

The men fired off the second round of grenades.

Both grenades flew into the naked window frames, just as planned.

The bald man peered into his binoculars.

Nothing was moving inside the destroyed classroom. There was no return fire. The wind sounded much louder in the sudden silence.

“Did we get him?”

The half-dried trail of blood cut across the grounds, went up the stairs on the right-hand side of the school, and led into the second floor hallway.

The short man peered into the long, dark hall. The blood trail led into the third classroom. The door was squeaking on its last hinge.

The men held their persuaders at the ready and stalked down the hall. When they reached the classroom, one person took aim and another kicked down the door.

Inside they found the ruined classroom, gutted by shrapnel from floor to ceiling. Several desks were flipped on their sides and tops, their metal legs bent.

“He’s not here,” the short man said, scanning the room, and slowly stepped inside. There was no one there. Not even a body.

The bald man and the man with the backpack followed him inside, watching their rear.

“Look, his rifle. We could use it,” the short man said, prodding with his foot at a persuader pinned under a desk. Some shrapnel had pierced the stock, but the frame and the scope were protected from the impact by the desk.

The short man leaned down to grab it.

“Stop. We have to confirm he’s dead,” said the bald man.

The short man rose immediately, failing to notice the thin wire tied to Flute’s trigger.

“Look.”

The man with the backpack spotted more blood under one of the desks. The trail led through the other set of classroom doors leading back into the hallway. This time, the trail was a smear against the floor.

“He’s got guts, I’ll give him that,” the short man said with a grin. He led the

way as the group went back into the hallway. They only saw the left half of their target's footprints. Where the right footprints should have been, they only saw smears of blood.

The blood led them to the classroom next door. The door showed signs of having been opened and closed once. And no signs of anyone having left.

The short man squatted by the door and slowly turned the knob, his friends covering him with their rifles.

The door squeaked open with ease.

Rifle at the ready, the short man followed the blood trail and looked around the classroom. The smear continued across the floor and stopped at a desk standing alone in the middle of the room.

On the desk was a familiar face.

A bearded one. Its eyes were shut as if in peaceful sleep. Behind the face was the head, and underneath was its neck and a bloodied desk.

There was nothing else in the classroom.

"Ah... Ah..."

Moaning in anguish, the short man staggered into the room with his eyes wide open. The others froze.

The head rested on the piece of cloth that had been wrapped around it until not too long ago. The cloth was dyed a deep red.

"It wasn't his own blood," said the man with the backpack.

"God...dammit... The bastard..." the short man gasped, approaching the desk. "This is inhuman...insulting the dead... Damn you...damn you..."

The rifle fell out of his hands. Weeping, the short man reached for his friend's head.

"He's a monster... I swear..."

His hands cupped his friend's face.

"We'll avenge you...I swear, we are going to make him pay..."

And he picked up the head.

“STOP!” cried the bald man.

The wire tied to the hair on the severed head was stretched taut.

Tied to the end of the wire was a waterproof match, stuck between two stones tied together. Along with a fuse.

A small green bottle hidden in the bearded man’s hair came loose, falling onto the cloth. A burning fuse was stuck in the mouth of the bottle. The short man could do nothing but stare.

“Huh?”

There was an explosion.

A deafening boom shook the building and shattered every window in the class.

White smoke poured out onto the balcony.

Kino watched from next to the north staircase as the smoke cleared. She made her way towards the classroom.

With Cannon in her right hand, red with a stranger’s blood, she stepped through the crumpled doorway and entered the ruined classroom.

One of the men was missing his upper body, which was splattered all over the walls.

Another person was moaning by the wall, his face stuffed with shards of glass. Hands trembling, he tried to pull the pin out of his grenade.

The bald man lying by the door moved. His right hand was trying to draw a hand persuader out of his holster.

Kino stood before the man with the grenade and shot him in the chest. He recoiled once, and stopped moving.

The bald man held the persuader in his bloodied right hand and took aim.

“You can’t,” Kino said, as the man tried to fire. He pulled anyway.

The persuader was silent. It fell out of his hand. The man found himself

missing an index and a middle finger.

Kino came up to him.

“To think you were just a child...” he said, looking up.

“Tell me,” Kino said, “Why did you attack me?”

The man breathed a long, heavy sigh. “We were just trying to protect our country...”

“Your country?” Kino repeated.

The man reached into his shirt, and with his thumb, pulled out the pendants inside by the chains. The small, round pendants were marked with stars.

Holding the pendants before his eyes, the man stared at them. “This is our country... And that is why we are fighting...” he mumbled. “But...we failed. We came home failures, failing to become heroes. When we returned, everyone was gone... We couldn’t be heroes out there, so we at least wanted to become heroes who protected our home... But now it’s over. We die failures...”

Kino did not interrupt.

“Now kill me,” said the man. “Pull the trigger...and let me join the others.”

“No need. You’re going to die soon anyway,” Kino replied.

The man missing his left hand and the flesh over his stomach replied from a pool of his own blood,

“Oh. I see.”

He man grinned.

The bald man died with a smile.

Kino gently shut the man’s eyes.

“‘Though they never returned, our heroes live on forever in our hearts’,” she recited. Then she closed her own eyes.

“Welcome back, Kino. You’re covered in blood—not hurt anywhere?”

“No. Probably.”

“Did you get them all?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Yeah. No one here’s going to fire at us without warning now.”

“Kino, check your left pocket.”

“Huh?”

“A hole. Are you sure they didn’t get you?”

“...I had no idea. When did they do this? Was it at the park?”

“Anyway, did you get me anything?”

“Just these.”

“Huh? This is ammunition.”

“Yeah. From the rifles they were using. They’re a perfect match for Flute. In fact, I found more bullets than I used today.”

“Aww, you didn’t get anything for me?”

“I guess I have a story for you.”

“Yeah? How does it go?”

*



Chapter 5: The Heroes' Country -Seven Heroes-

The sun was not even halfway to its peak when the traveler arrived at the gates. The sky was clear, but there was a chill in the air.

The traveler was on a motorrad with compartments hanging over either side of the rear wheel, and a large suitcase secured to the luggage rack.

The rider was in a long brown coat, its edges wrapped around her thighs. She wore a hat with ear flaps and a bill, and a pair of goggles over her eyes. There was a bandanna around her face to protect it from the wind.

The traveler went up to the guardhouse outside the gates.

“Good morning. My name is Kino, and this is my partner Hermes. We’d like to request a three-day stay.”

The guard on duty courteously asked several questions before letting in the traveler and her motorrad.

When the guard asked if Kino was in possession of any persuaders, she nodded. “Are they banned in this country, by any chance?”

“Not at all. The very opposite,” the guard replied with a smile.

Kino and Hermes passed through the gates and into the white walls.

The land was flat and sprawling; plenty of room for wide streets and large, one-story buildings. Many of the buildings seemed to have been built recently.

As Kino studied the map she received at the guardhouse, a kindly old man drove up in a small truck. He was a guide from the country.

The guide gave Kino and Hermes a hearty welcome, and took them by truck to a hotel. The truck drove down the wide, deserted streets to the city center.

At the hotel, the guide gave Kino and Hermes a lesson on the country’s history.

The country had originally been two smaller nations that merged seventeen years earlier. One of the nations was a kingdom with a large territory but a small population, and the other was a republic with a small territory and a large

population. The land they were in now was part of the old kingdom, and the old republic was far across the mountain range.

The merger happened thus: the king of the kingdom lost his mind one day, causing his people great suffering. The kingdom's citizens, unable to bear any more of his tyranny, called on the republic across the mountain range for help. The tiny, crowded republic accepted the request. They helped put the mad king away in a hospital, after which the two nations were peacefully merged into one. The new country was a democracy where all citizens enjoyed the same rights and freedoms.

In this country, all citizens were mandated to serve in the military for a time. Everyone between the ages of eighteen and fifty were officially registered as soldiers, and were called upon regularly for training. Every household possessed weapons, and everyone would be conscripted upon to fight if a war broke out. That was why marksmanship was one of the country's favorite pastimes.

"I see," Kino said, recalling what she had heard at the guardhouse.

That afternoon, Kino and Hermes explored the area. Then she took him in for maintenance and stocked up on necessities at the store.

Near the wall, they spotted a sign that read, 'NATIONAL SHOOTING RANGE'. The sign was attached to a massive outdoor facility. The manager approached her and explained that the shooting range was closed for the day for maintenance.

Kino introduced herself and asked if she could visit for some practice. The manager replied, eyes sparkling, "Then please drop by tomorrow. We can offer you the entire range, free of charge. And please do give us some persuader lessons as well."

The next day, Kino rose at dawn.

She started off the day with her usual exercises and reached for her persuaders for training, but paused.

Then she decided to train after all.

After breakfast, Kino smacked Hermes awake and headed for the shooting range.

Though it was still early, the shooting range was packed with everyone from ordinary citizens to people in military uniforms. The manager from the previous day welcomed Kino and introduced her to the crowd. He explained that Kino traveled with a pair of persuaders, and that she was capable of defending herself on the road. Everyone was very impressed, and asked for her guidance.

“It’d be really funny if you turned out to be really bad with persuaders, Kino,” Hermes said.

The shooting range was equipped with all sorts of facilities for all sorts of situations, from short to long distances. Targets could move automatically, and far-off targets were shown on a live feed so shooters could quickly tell how well they had done.

One facility was a mockup of a building interior, from which popped up mannequins dressed up like villains, women carrying babies, or children holding knives.

As the people watched, Kino practiced shooting live ammunition with Cannon and Woodsman.

Each time she did something, Kino was showered with thunderous applause. “All this attention is making it hard to focus,” she mumbled.

“Remember what Master always used to say, Kino,” Hermes advised, “Maintain discipline at all times.”

“You don’t have a rifle, Kino?” the manager asked over lunch at the cafeteria. “Wouldn’t you feel safer with a longer-range persuader?”

Kino agreed, but explained that traveling on Hermes made it difficult to carry around a large weapon.

The manager replied with a smile, “We have the perfect model for you.”

After lunch, the manager brought over a case. “Here you are. Thank you for waiting,” he said, opening it up to reveal a rifle.

The model he brought her could be dismantled, and was in two pieces in the case. The back half consisted of a wooden stock and a scope, and the front was a metallic black frame with a long cylinder.

“This is an automatic model with a built-in suppressor, which can be dismantled for better portability. It’s brand-new—we just began supplying it to the military recently. It boasts improved accuracy and a sturdier build.”

The manager offered to let Kino hold the rifle. She looked at the manual and put together the parts according to the diagrams.

“What do you think? Isn’t it lovely?”

Kino replied that the rifle was comfortable to hold, and that it looked like it would be easy to wield as well.

“Would you like to take it for a test run? Please give us your feedback.”

Kino took the rifle to the range. She placed it on a cushion on a table and took aim at a distant target through the scope.

Each time a bullet pierced the black circle at the center of the target, the crowds behind her went wild.

“Still distracting?” Hermes asked.

“I’m used to it now,” Kino replied, and pulled the trigger. There was another roar of approval.

Once Kino had practiced to her heart’s content, she was bombarded with questions. One person asked her whom she had trained under.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t answer that question,” Kino replied.

Another person asked her how advanced her training facility was.

“Actually, I trained in the middle of the woods,” Kino replied.

Someone else asked for Kino to at least reveal how she came to be so skilled.

“...All I can say is that what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger,” Kino replied.

Afternoon was halfway over, and Kino and the manager were sitting around a cafeteria table eating dessert.

“You were amazing, Kino. Everyone was very impressed—and motivated to try even harder now.”

“Yeah, Kino. It’s nice to see you get some recognition for once,” said Hermes.

“The more our citizens improve their marksmanship skills, the more our defense capabilities will be strengthened. And that in turn will help us maintain peace and security in the area.”

“Does this country have any enemies?” asked Kino.

The manager smiled sheepishly. “Actually, this country—in fact, both the countries that formed this one—have never been in war. There are no potential enemies around us. We say that every able-bodied citizen is a soldier, but no one has any marksmanship experience aside from shooting paper targets and mannequins. We take pride in our regular training exercises and the abilities of individual men and women, but we have no idea how combat-capable we really are.”

“It’s wonderful that you’re living in peace,” said Kino. “And if the worst should happen, your training will pay off. I’m sure everyone will do better than they thought they could.”

“Thank you very much, Kino. It’s very encouraging to hear that. We’ll redouble our efforts and continue our training.”

“I’m impressed. Always expect the unexperten,” said Hermes.

“Pardon me?” the manager asked, befuddled.

“Hermes, are you doing that on purpose?”

“What?”

That evening, the manager told Kino to keep the rifle if she liked it and found it portable enough to carry. He added that he hoped their excellent persuader could help her in her travels.

Kino thought for a moment and expressed her gratitude, accepting the rifle. She asked for its name.

“We don’t really have one. Just a designation—‘National Disassembly Rifle Type-52’.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“I’ll have to think of a name later,” said Kino.

On the third day, Kino spent the morning touring the area on Hermes.

In the city center was the palace from the old kingdom, the area around which had been converted into a public park.

Kino asked Hermes what he thought of the palace. He replied snidely, “It’s not bad. But it’s all the same, Kino. Kings pouring all their money into big palaces until the people get angry and overthrow him. The palace then gets turned into a park because people want to keep the pretty building. I’ve never seen a king get praise while he was still on the throne.”

In a corner of the park was a large black stone cut like a wall.

Kino approached the stone. People were engraved into it—smiling young men standing in a line.

“Pardon me, is this a monument to something?” Kino asked a passing man in his fifties.

The man nodded firmly. “Yes. It’s a memorial to a group of brave young heroes.”

“Heroes?”

“Yes. All of us from the republic remember them. This was thirty years ago, years before the two countries merged. The republic was teeming with people and packed to bursting. But we simply couldn’t expand our borders, so the government sent out scouting teams to search for a new place to settle. Twelve teams in all, sent out in every direction.”

“I see. What happened to them?”

“The government recruited young men, who were put in teams of seven. Each team would come back from their expedition in six months, whether they succeeded or not. Eleven returned.”

“What about the last team?”

“Over a decade passed, but they never came back. This team was dispatched to the harshest area—the mountains. They must have been stranded somewhere. The government built this monument in their memory. This is what

the men looked like when they set off. Afterwards, the republic merged with the kingdom, and we all moved to this land. We left most of the buildings as they were, but dragged this monument with us. We couldn't just leave it there to be forgotten. Our heroes are even in our school textbooks now."

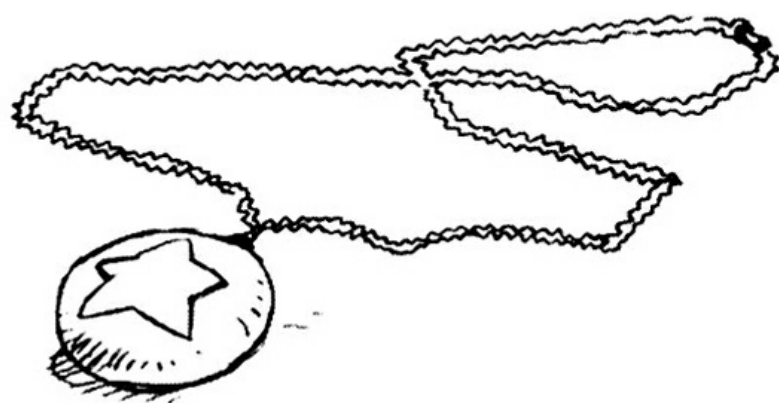
Kino turned her gaze to the monument again. The young men wore bright, brave smiles. They were all armed with now-outdated rifles and wearing identical pendants. Small, round pendants marked with stars.

The man said, "Why not drop by the old republic on your way, Traveler? Cross two large mountains to the west and you'll find it in a hollow. We've left it all as it was, ramparts and buildings and all. We're never going back, of course—we love our new home—but you might enjoy the place. have a look at the old buildings and houses we used to live in. The roads, I still remember, all lined with identical buildings, and the courtyards bustling with people. I'll never forget playing in those streets as a young boy. Ah, memories."

"That sounds interesting. I might drop by if I can," Kino said, and thanked the man. Once he departed, she glanced at the words engraved on the monument.

Written below the smiling men were the words,

'Though they never returned, our heroes live on forever in our hearts.'





Chapter 6: The Relaxed Country -Jog Trot-

We were sitting in a tea shop.

The tea shop was in a small home standing all alone by a dirt road.

Master Shizu sat on the back porch, looking out at the country on that lazy afternoon.

I sat on the firm dirt outside the porch, also looking out at the world before us.

It was sunny and warm, and fields splotched in greens and yellows spread in haphazard rows as far as the eye could see. Barns and silos dotted the landscape.

“What a relaxed country.”

I silently agreed.

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, soft, white fur. I look as though I am always smiling, but that doesn't mean I'm always happy. I was simply born with this face.

My owner is Master Shizu. He is a young man who is always wearing a green sweater, and he is traveling on a buggy after having lost his home in complex circumstances. I am accompanying him as we travel through all sorts of countries.

Master Shizu has no specific destination in mind. That is to say, he has a destination, but that destination is not a location.

The road took us to a country in the middle of a vast plain.

The guard at the gates let us through without even going through basic entry procedures. He was very curious to see an outlander.

“It's good of you to come visit, but we really have nothing to show or offer here.”

He was right. Inside the walls, we found an endless expanse of fields. Forests

and lakes occasionally broke the monotony, but not often enough. It seemed that this was an entirely agricultural country.

We continued along the road and the unchanging scenery around us until Master Shizu finally spotted a tea house.

“Dearie me, a traveler? How very unusual. Do relax and take your time here,” the old woman said, placing a cup of green tea next to Shizu. It did not smell of poison.

Master Shizu thanked the old woman and reached for his beloved sword, which he had propped up next to him. He put it down in front of me. It was my job to protect his sword when his attention had to be elsewhere. It was a job for me and me alone.

As he sipped his tea, Master Shizu asked the old woman about the country.

The old woman seemed to have nothing else to do, as she sat down beside him and answered all his questions.

The people of this land were all farmers living leisurely lives. They had a small population and a low population density, with fewer villages than they could count on their hands.

There were no potential enemies in the area, because there was nothing to be gained from conquering this country.

Very few travelers ever came to this land, and even if they did, there was not much for them to see and enjoy.

The country was a quiet, simple place where not much ever happened.

“And where might you be headed, young man?”

With a wry smile, Master Shizu shrugged. Then he confessed that he was a wanderer with no specific destination in mind.

The old woman seemed a little surprised, but replied, “If you’d like to settle down here, we’re always open to immigrants. There’s plenty of land to go around, and lots of farms that need a hand. And guard work, too, if you know how to fight.” Then she added, “Although there’s not much to guard against around here.”

Master Shizu smiled. “I wouldn’t mind that.”

The old woman went back into the kitchen.

Master Shizu cast his gaze at the fields once more. “What a relaxed country.”

I silently agreed.

A tractor was crawling across a field in the distance. It was headed towards a farmhouse, perhaps carrying a farmer home after a long day’s work.

“It might not be so bad here. Raising cattle and living a quiet life. Something I’ve never done before. I don’t need to do hard labor for others, and I don’t need to kill to survive. No more wandering through wastelands. A peaceful and stable place to call home, maybe for good...” Master Shizu mused. His eyes were still on the distance—and perhaps on his own past and future.

“Maybe so,” I replied, and said nothing more. The decision was his to make, not mine.

The old woman came over just as Master Shizu was about to continue.

“More tea, Traveler?”

Master Shizu held out his cup, and the old woman poured him a brimming cupful of green tea. She placed it next to him. There was a distant thud, and the ground began to shake.

Was it an earthquake? The house and the ground below shook. The wooden building rattled on its foundations, and droplets of tea sloshed out of the cup.

Soon, the trembling stopped. It had only lasted a few seconds.

“Oh dear,” the old woman sighed, wiping the spilled tea off the porch.

That was when I realized that Master Shizu was frozen, utterly thunderstruck. He was looking straight ahead.

I followed his gaze and was equally shocked.

The farmhouse and tractor from earlier were nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s the house?” Master Shizu wondered, getting off his seat. The old woman cast a glance in the same direction.

“Ah, I thought so. It’s been a while since the last one. Someone might have died, from the looks of it,” she said nonchalantly.

“Wh-what happened?” Master Shizu asked, turning.

The old woman asked him to wait a moment, and went to the phone on the wall to call someone.

Soon, she ended the call and turned. “I daresay it might be better for you to go see in person. Follow the road right and make a left at the last intersection. But don’t get too close.”

Master Shizu and I got on the buggy and followed the woman’s directions.

He parked at the crest of a small hill and disembarked. I leapt from the passenger seat to the hood, and realized what had happened.

There was a gaping hole in the ground.

It was almost perfectly circular in shape, and was about 200 meters wide. From the hill, it was impossible to tell how deep it went. It was a straight drop, which had likely swallowed the farmhouse and the tractor whole.

As Master Shizu looked on in horror, we heard sirens behind us. A truck with a crane approached. Master Shizu moved the buggy out of the way.

The truck stopped right in front of the hole and lowered the crane. Suspended from the crane was a bucket carrying a person.

“That was fast. They’re well-prepared, too,” Master Shizu whispered.

Another vehicle came up and parked next to the buggy.

“You’re a traveler, I see,” said the man in the truck, “Keep your distance, now. Don’t want to end up falling in. Follow this road up that way and turn right, and you’ll see a tea house. The old woman there can tell you more about this.”

“Did you see the hole?” the old woman said casually when Master Shizu and I returned.

“Yes. What was it? What caused it?” Master Shizu asked.

The old woman did not seem very concerned. “There used to be a quarry here, a very long time ago. So they say the ground here is full of cavities. The

land could cave in at any time.”

“Is there no way to fill in the cavities?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have any maps of the old quarry, or people to explore them,” the old woman said, troubled. But she quickly regained her composure. “But it’s nothing to be worried about, dear. It’s very rare that people and houses fall in like today. We can always fill in the holes, and the cave-ins only happen a few times a month. Nothing to fret over.”

The old woman refilled Master Shizu’s cold tea.

“So what will you be doing now, Traveler? If you’re looking to settle here, I could help you look for a house.”

With a rather stiff smile, Master Shizu shook his head.

And he asked for directions to a place where he could buy portable rations and refuel his buggy immediately.





Chapter 7: The Country with a Prophecy -We NO the Future-

A lone road cut through the forest.

The forest was dark and deep, crowded with tall coniferous trees. Ferns sprouted from the moist earth underfoot.

The road went from east to west, wide and once meticulously paved but now cracked and faded.

Small saplings grew out of the cracks in the pavement. Seeds must have landed in the tiny patches of dirt in between and put down their roots there.

One little sprout stood in middle of the road, its two leaves basking in the blinding sun.

A lone motorrad was traveling down the road.

In the blink of an eye, its who wheels ran over the little sprout and left nothing behind.

The motorrad continued westward.

Compartments hung from either side of its rear wheel, atop which was stacked a suitcase and a sleeping bag. The metal mug dangling from the compartment shook and clattered.

The rider was a young human in her mid-teens.

She wore a black jacket and a thick belt. Strapped to her right thigh was a holster housing a revolver. A slender automatic persuader was secured behind her back.

The rider's head of black hair was covered by a hat with a bill and ear flaps. She also wore silver-rimmed goggles that were peeling at the edges.

Finally, she tapped on the motorrad's fuel tank and said, "I see it."

A wall of green stood in the forest. The boundary of a country. The walls leaned outwards as they reached the apex, drawing an elegant arc. Pillars stood

supporting it at regular intervals, and dark green vines crawled up the entirety of its surface.

The motorrad came to a stop at a point with a full view of the walls.

“I’ve never seen ramparts like these before,” the rider said, still on the motorrad.

“Yeah,” the motorrad replied, “It’s beautiful. And the shape is really unusual, too.”

The rider stared at the walls for some time, not saying a single word.

“What’s the matter, Kino?” asked the motorrad.

Kino gave a faint smile, her eyes hidden beneath her goggles. “It just occurred to me. When I was little, I never thought I’d end up traveling so far.”

“No one knows what’ll happen in the future. Like they always say, who knows what the dark will bring?”

“You mean, who knows what the road will bring?”

“Yeah, that.”

The motorrad said no more.

“I wonder if that’s even the right phrase to use,” Kino mumbled. “Let’s go, Hermes.”

“Yeah.”

Kino put Hermes into gear and slowly rode down to the gates.

“The world is ending?”

“The world is ending. At the break of dawn on the day after tomorrow,” the immigration officer said firmly at the gates. She continued, “If you wish, we can still grant you a three-day stay as you requested. Although that will mean you will face the end of the world in our country.”

Kino stared. The woman was dead serious.

The woman in her late twenties was the only person at the guardhouse near the middle of the heavy gates.

“How exactly is the world going to end?” Hermes asked from a short distance away.

“We have no idea.”

“What?”

“But we do know that the world will soon end. Our lives too, of course. We have accepted this fact. It is unavoidable. Absolute,” the officer said, grim.

“Er...how do you know the world will end?” Kino asked.

The officer nodded. “That is an excellent question, Traveler.” Then she said resolutely, “Because it has been foretold.”

Kino stepped through the gates and got a view of the sunset city at a glance.

In the distance, she could just make out the walls on the other side of the country. The great circle drew a gentle arc around the city. Large thoroughfares fanned out from the middle of the country, with farmland and residential districts alternating in between. Greenbelts had been left intact, and nestled within were orderly rows of houses with thick, round brick chimneys. At the very center of the country were several tall buildings and a lake that glimmered gold in the light of dusk.

“It’s beautiful on the inside, too,” Kino noted.

Hermes agreed. “Yeah. I like the log houses, and how the city layout fits the geography. But the prophecy says it’s all going to end the day after tomorrow, right?”

“The prophecy, huh.” Kino mumbled.

The immigration officer had not explained who made this prophecy, or why. She simply said—completely resigned to her fate—that the prophecy would come true and the world would end, and that nothing could change this future.

Then, out of nowhere, she had burst into tears. Nothing Kino or Hermes said could console her. Kino had given up and entered the country.

“What now, Kino?”

“We’ll ask around and find a place to stay,” Kino replied, climbing onto

Hermes. Without starting the engine, she kicked off lightly and rode down the hill. They headed for the nearest street.

They reached a wide road lined with shops. But none of the stores were open, and no one was out and about. Not a single car was on the road.

“It’s like a ghost town,” said Hermes.

They finally spotted an old man sitting blankly on a crate, and asked him for directions to a hotel. He silently pointed at a larger building a slight distance away.

Kino knocked on the door, and the middle-aged manager eventually answered. He was flabbergasted.

Kino introduced herself and explained what she was doing.

“You’re a traveler, you say? You just arrived and want a room here?”

The manager went on to ask her how long she intended to stay. She replied that she would check out on the morning of the day after.

“The day after tomorrow? I’m sorry to say, it looks like your journey’s going to end here in our country,” the manager said, echoing the immigration officer.

When Kino answered that she did not mind, the manager led her and Hermes to a luxurious room.

“It’s free of charge, Traveler. Not much use in money when the world is about to end. ...Make yourself at home,” he said, opening the windows and dusting off the tables. He then left the suite.

Kino unloaded her things from Hermes, took off her jacket, and flopped onto the massive bed.

“So the world’s gonna end tomorrow? I wonder what this prophecy could be?” Hermes wondered. Kino was already asleep.

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn.

She did light exercises, then maintained Cannon—her revolver—and Woodsman, an automatic hand persuader. After doing drills with her persuaders, Kino showered.

Watching the sun rise over the ramparts in the distance, she had rations for breakfast. Then she smacked Hermes awake and went out sightseeing.

People sat around on benches and chairs outside the stores on the street. Their stares were vacant. Not even the sight of Kino and Hermes seemed to rouse their interest.

“This is weird,” Hermes mumbled.

“Everyone looks so resigned. ...Or maybe not quite everyone.”

Without warning, Kino stopped Hermes in the middle of the road. She quickly put down his side stand and leapt off.

“Huh? What—whoa!”

Hermes soon learned why.

A young man brandishing a lead pipe was rushing towards them, eyes bloodshot. Onlookers were visibly shocked.

Kino stood in the man’s way. He swung.

Turning, Kino kicked at the man’s legs. He crumpled forward, scraping himself against the pavement.

Kino stamped her heel on his hand and took away the lead pipe. Then she slammed it down hard on the man’s back.

The man desperately turned his head. “Die, damn it! Die!”

“What in the world is going on here?” Hermes wondered.

“Damn it... Damn it...”

The young man began to weep. A middle-aged man emerged from the crowds in the distance and came up to Kino.

“I’m terribly sorry about this, Traveler. Will you please let the man go? I promise, we won’t let him pull any more stupid stunts like this.”

Kino looked around at the people. They all looked apologetic. She took away the lead pipe, and the middle-aged man gestured for others to take away the sobbing young man.

“I’m very sorry. The young people are having a hard time, poor things, trying to accept it all. It’s such a relief that you were capable of handling yourself. Again, we are so sorry about this.”

Kino looked at the middle-aged man. “Was he acting that way because the world is going to end?”

The man nodded. “That’s right. Our young people still had their entire futures ahead of them, the poor things, and some of them just can’t accept what’s going to happen. Even older people like me are scared, even if we’ve lived long enough.”

“What’s this prophecy about, anyway?” Hermes asked. The man seemed taken aback.

“You don’t know about the prophecy?”

“No. Could you please tell us about it?”

The man led Kino and Hermes to a nearby restaurant. Round tables and seats were arranged inside, filled with people sitting blankly. People turned when Kino entered. It was dim inside, as the lights had not been turned on. Only the ceiling fans quietly rotated in place.

The man introduced Kino and Hermes to the others. Kino propped up Hermes on his center stand and took a seat at a table.

“The traveler here doesn’t know about the prophecy,” the man explained. Everyone was surprised. They brought over their chairs, looking a little more excited.

“Then it’s only right that we explain.” “It would be awful to die without knowing why.” “Yeah. Especially since you’re going to die here, of all places.” “Don’t forget to explain about the great scholar.” “Let me explain too.”

“Then let me begin,” said the man who led Kino and Hermes to the restaurant. He asked the others there to correct him if he got any details wrong. “I should start with the Book of Prophecy and the great scholar who successfully deciphered the document.”

The other patrons nodded.

“The Book of Prophecy?” “What kind of book is it?” asked Kino and Hermes.

“Unfortunately, we have no idea who wrote this book, or when. All we know is that it was a confounding text published in a distant land long ago. It’s so abstract that we all used to think it was a madman’s journal. But as it turned out, it was a book of prophecies that predicted our future with frightening accuracy. The one who decoded this book and learned the truth was the priest in the southern district, our country’s foremost prophecy scholar.”

“How did he find out it was a prophecy?” asked Kino.

“Forty-two years ago, he tried deciphering the book half out of curiosity, and noticed the hidden messages, The book was written in a code that used metaphors and combinations of different characters to predict the future. The page and line numbers corresponded with the years and months these events would occur in. Trembling, the priest continued to decode the book, page by page...”

The man paused there and took a deep breath.

“As he went through the book, he found more. More and more prophecies,” he said grimly, as though he were reliving the moment the priest realized the truth. Everyone held their breath.

Kino looked around at the patrons. “What did the book predict, specifically?”

This time, the other patrons spoke up as well.

“It described the great famine 198 years ago.”

“We used to have a royal family here. And the book described how the king 122 years ago died of a sudden illness. And how it was a sickness that made his nose fall off!”

“We had a massive chestnut harvest eighty-seven years ago, and there was so much that we couldn’t get rid of it all! That was written in the book too!”

“It predicted how the queen mother 143 years ago fell from her horse and broke her leg.”

“The bloodless revolution fifty-four years ago, and how the weather went from clear in the morning to rain in the afternoon. It was all described in perfect

detail, all the way down to how the former king died a gardener!”

“And how there was an awful flood in autumn, forty-four years ago because of heavy rainfall! The lake wouldn’t drain for half a year! The number of characters on the page was the exact water level of the lake!”

“Even the big fire in the northern district twenty-five years ago. It even predicted which house would be spared. And that the owner of the house was an eighty-nine-year-old woman! I got chills down my spine when I heard this one!”

“Twelve wanderers came to our country in the winter, twenty-three years ago. It was all in the Book. It predicted how all of them, except for one who was too violent and cruel, would settle in this country. And how one of the wanderers had a name that started with a ‘Te’. The whole thing made headlines.”

“The Book predicted how a pharmacist in a blue shirt poisoned people with his concoctions nineteen years ago. Can you believe how it even got the color of his shirt?”

“The hailstorm ten years ago in early summer, and how it decimated farms. I still remember it like it was yesterday...”

“That’s not all! It even records how we boil tree sap to make syrup...”

Kino waited for everyone to have their turn before she asked, “Er...did the priest tell you about these things before they happened?”

The middle-aged man shook his head. “No. He pointed us to the passages after the fact.”

“What?” Hermes said, “then he could just make—”

Kino kicked Hermes. “I see. I think I understand the situation. But how does the prophecy for tomorrow go?”

“Ah yes, the end of the world... The final passage in the book goes like this: ‘After the night of the nineteenth full moon, the sun shall rise on the end of the world. To us is left one action: to break the green plate.’ Green plates symbolize life in our country. We give them as birthday gifts. In other words, no one will

be born after this time. All we can do is grieve.”

“Then the book’s afterword—”

Kino kicked Hermes’ frame.

“This prophecy was publicized about thirty years ago. The priest was hesitant to announce it, of course, but he decided that he could not bear to keep the people in the dark.”

“It must have been terrifying.”

“Of course. For a month or so, the whole country was despondent. But we all knew how real the prophecies are. So we accepted our end. The priest told us that the important thing was to live to the fullest until the end. But if I had to be honest, many of us thought tomorrow was still so far away,” said the man.

A woman drinking in the back spoke up. “And now it really is tomorrow. Time flies. All we can do now is sit around drinking together...”

“Don’t put it that way,” someone else said sadly. “I mean, it’s easy to say we have to live to the fullest, but it’s hard in practice. And that made things even more depressing. I can’t take it.”

“I understand.” Kino said gravely, nodding.

“What are you going to do now? You only have a day left,” said the man.

“I’m going shopping,” Kino replied.

“What would you do with all this stuff when the world is going to end tomorrow?” asked the manager of the general store, coming outside.

“Maybe it won’t,” Hermes said.

The manager nodded in understanding. “I can see why you might think that way.”

“Really?”

“You still don’t believe the prophecy, Traveler. But I understand. I used to be the same way. I came around eventually, after seeing how all the prophecies came true. So I’ve accepted the end. I’ll just live to the fullest until then.”

“I see. Then I choose to shop. It’s a luxury for me because I’m always on the

road,” Kino said.

“I guess that’s all right. Everything in my store is free. Take it all. I’ll die happier that way, I think.”

“Just what I can carry, thank you. I like the knives on display. Could I have those, please?”

“Would you like to pray with us, Traveler? It might bring you some peace of mind,” said the owner of the restaurant Kino was dining at. She politely declined his offer and returned to the hotel. The hotel manager was praying with his family.

The next morning. It was Kino’s third day in this country.

Kino rose at dawn.

A light mist blanketed the entire country, but there was an unsettling air in the city. Some people were running from their houses and down the streets as the world grew bright.

Kino was still doing her persuader training when Hermes woke up on his own, surprising her. “The world’s going to end now, right Kino? I woke up because I couldn’t wait.”

“Yeah,” Kino replied, wiping Cannon with a piece of cloth. “So much has happened.”

“Wanna go see the world end?” Hermes asked.

“Yeah. Just let me finish.”

Kino holstered Cannon, then began doing left-handed drawing practice with Woodsman.

“Why train when the world is gonna end?” Hermes wondered.

After working up a good sweat, Kino took Hermes outside.

The fog had lifted. The air was cool and the sky was a clear blue.

People were crowding the plaza at the city center, situated next to the lake. They were praying desperately towards the east.

“It’s going to rise soon,” said Hermes. Someone standing blankly nearby

trembled.

The murmurs of prayer grew louder and louder until a bell began to toll. It tolled on and on and on like mad, and beams of sunlight began shining on the taller buildings.

Soon, the blinding sun rose over the walls and shone over the entire country.

People gasped and screamed.

“The sun’s beautiful today, too,” said Kino.

“Yeah. We’re in for a good day of riding,” Hermes agreed.

The sun had risen completely, and was three times its own size from the horizon. People stopped praying and began to mutter. The muttering eventually gave way to anger.

“Nothing’s happening.”

“Is the world over already?”

“We’re still alive, though.”

“The sun’s up.”

“What’s happened?”

“Why?”

“Nothing happened?”

“Damn it. It can’t be...”

“No way.”

“Was the prophecy wrong?”

Soon, someone called, “Hey, there’s the priest!”

A black car came to a stop nearby, and a kindly-looking old man in heavy clothing stepped into the middle of the plaza. He was surrounded by his followers.

Everyone’s eyes followed him. Kino and Hermes watched from the back.

“Ahem. Everyone,” the priest said stiffly. He was speaking through a

megaphone.

There was a moment of silence. Countless icy gazes were on the priest.

“B-beautiful weather today, don’t you agree?”

“Who cares about the weather? What about the prophecy?” someone barked.

“Well, about that matter...”

Someone else cried, “You weren’t lying to us, were you?!”

“N-not at all! I—I know exactly what the last passage meant. It said the world was going to end!”

“Then why’re we still alive? You said it was going to be today!” a young woman demanded, and burst into tears.

“That is to say, I...”

The priest panicked, and more voices began to demand an explanation.

Finally—

“All right, fine! Fine! That’s right, everyone. The world is over! It’s all ended!” the priest howled into the microphone.

Everyone but Kino stared in shock.

“Listen!” the priest said, handing the megaphone to a follower. He spread his arms wide, his sleeves fluttering in the morning breeze. “Listen to me!” he cried, “You! And I! We all believed the world was going to end! That the world would end when the sun rose today, just as the prophecy says! That is exactly the point! The prophecy was correct! Because! Because! The ‘world’ we lived in until now! The world where we thought the world would end today because of the prophecy! Is over! The world you have lived in has ended! And a new world has come! Yes, the prophecy has come to pass!”

Several seconds passed in silence.

The lake’s surface trembled at the wave of anger that followed.

Kino and Hermes watched on for some time.

The angry mob tried to get to the priest, who was desperately protected by his followers and the devout. He escaped with his life intact.

Even as the people hurled insults at the priest, however, they were visibly relieved. Some were hugging tightly and sobbing.

The owner of the general store Kino had visited the previous night spotted her. When Kino expressed her relief at the world not ending, he put on an awkward smile.

“By the way, Traveler, about yesterday...”

“Thank you for your generosity,” Kino replied with a smile, “I accept your hospitality.” The owner walked away with a smile of disbelief on his face.

The priest was creeping out of the plaza with his followers, shoulders drooping, when he stopped halfway into the car.

He looked up; utter horror spread across his face.

Without warning, he grabbed his megaphone from a follower and shouted at the top of his lungs, “E-everyone! You must listen to me!”

Everyone gave him their full, undivided, unbelieving attention.

“L-l-l-l-listen closely, everyone! Today was not the day! I just realized! I only just realized, everyone! This is important, you must listen to me!”

Although his followers tried to stop him, the priest continued to yell.

“Th-the world *will* end soon! I made a mistake! I assumed that last night was the night of the nineteenth full moon, but that was a mistake! Do you remember, everyone? There was a lunar eclipse on the fourth full moon! The moon disappeared! Which means that today is not the day! We should have counted out the night of the eclipse! Koff! Koff!” the priest continued, even through his coughing fits. “Then! It makes perfect sense for the world to not end today. It’s the morning after the *next* full moon! Then the world as we know it will end! You must prepare yourselves!” he declared.

A nearby man snatched the megaphone from his grip. “Oh really? Don’t believe his lies, everyone! No one knows what the future holds!”

There was a deafening round of applause.

The priest stood blankly. But he was soon pulled into the black car by his followers. The car departed.

“We should get going too,” Kino said.

Kino and Hermes left through the western gates and looked up once more at the curious walls before making their way down the road.

They climbed up a gentle slope to the top of a hilly mountain and turned. The country they had left was tiny in the distance.

“Three of them,” Hermes muttered out of the blue. Kino nodded.

Stopping Hermes in the middle of the road, she shut off his engine and propped him up on his center stand.

They were surrounded by woods on either side.

“Who’s there? You don’t have to hide from me,” Kino cried, still wearing her hat and goggles.

“Excuse us!” said two men, coming out of the bushes. They were in their thirties, dressed like travelers or perhaps lumberjacks. “Sorry about that. I guess people hiding in the bushes are naturally suspicious,” one of them said, chuckling. “Are you a traveler?”

“Yes. Where is your friend?” Kino asked.

“He’ll be out soon.”

Finally, the third man emerged. He was dressed like the others. The men introduced themselves as being from the country beyond the mountain range.

“What were you doing here?” Hermes asked, “Looking for rare herbs?”

The men exchanged glances. One of them said, “Traveler, could you keep a secret? We have an interesting story we want to share with you.”

“I’m afraid not,” Kino said, climbing onto Hermes. The men panicked.

“Now, now. Listen. It’ll be worth your while, I promise. This’ll be one to tell all the other travelers you meet along the way. We’re actually scouts from the country seven mountains away. We’re pretending to be lumberjacks and keeping tabs on the country you just came from.”

“Why?” Hermes asked, idling. The men grinned.

“We’re going to invade that country and slaughter everyone inside on the morning after the next full moon.”

“What?”

“What are you talking about?” Kino asked coldly.

“Exactly what it sounds like. After the next full moon, we’re going to invade at sunrise and kill everyone there. We’ll destroy everything there completely, so no one will ever know there was a country there to begin with.”

“Ooh, why?” Hermes asked, surprised, and added quietly, “Because of the prophecy?”

The men’s eyes turned to dinner plates. They exchanged shocked glances. “Yes! That’s right! How did you know about it?”

“What are you talking about?” Kino asked again.

Excited, the men launched into an explanation. “Our country has something called a Book of Prophecy, deciphered by a man who immigrated twenty-two years ago. It detailed multiple events that happened in our country with frightening accuracy. It’s never been wrong. All our floods, pandemics, accidents, and incidents were predicted by this book. Every time something happened in our country, this prophecy scholar pointed out the section of the book that predicted it ahead of time.”

Kino and Hermes were silent.

“And you see, the final passage in the book refers to the end of the world! We were all terrified. But the passage also explained a way to avert the end!”

“How?” asked Hermes.

“This is how it goes: ‘After the night of the nineteenth full moon, the sun shall rise on the end of the world. To us is left one action: to break the green plate.’ The nineteenth full moon here is talking about next month’s full moon. Once that night passes and the sun rises, the world will end. And the only way to prevent this is to break the green plate.”

“That’s why you’re going to destroy that country?”

The men nodded. “That’s right. You must have noticed. The walls, the geography, that country is shaped exactly like a green plate. It’s astounding how the scholar realized all this. We owe everything to him.”

“But isn’t total destruction kind of going too far?” Hermes wondered

“Not at all. If that country isn’t annihilated, the world will end. This issue affects more than just our land. You’ll die too if the world ends. Our scholar says that he has no idea how thoroughly the ‘plate’ has to be broken, which means we have to destroy it completely if we want to be safe. We have a responsibility to act, because we know that the end is coming. The night of the nineteenth full moon is coming. Astronomers passed over the month with the lunar eclipse, so the next full moon will be the day of reckoning. Our countrymen must be busy with preparations back home.”

“I see,” Kino said quietly. “Thank you for the explanation. If you’ll excuse us, then.”

That was when the men surrounded her.

“Traveler, did you really think you could listen to this story and leave alive? It would be trouble for us if you decided to go back to that country and tell them what we’re planning. We wouldn’t be able to save the world. Please forget us and everything about the prophecy on your way to hell.”

The men drew hand axes from behind their backs and lunged in unison.

Kino leaned back as though having lost her support. Three blades cut the air above her. She lay on the road, holding Cannon in her right hand and Woodsman in her left.

Three gunshots shattered the air. Followed by three heavy impacts.

Three men fell to the ground, holes gaping through their necks.

Kino stood.

“You know, it just occurred to me,” Kino said, reloading Cannon, “When I first met Master, I had no idea that I’d be able to take care of myself like this. I never knew I’d get so good at handling persuaders.”

Hermes, who stood with his engine turned off, replied, “No one knows what’ll

happen in the future. Like they always say, who knows what the dark will bring?"

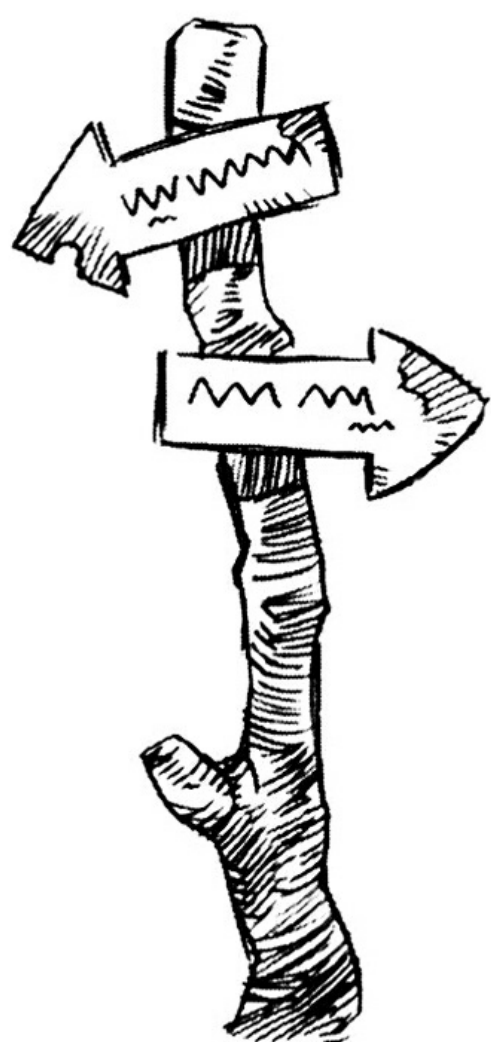
"I wonder if that's even the right phrase to use," Kino mumbled, completely reloading her persuaders.

Holstering Cannon, she looked around to see if she had not left anything. Three hand axes and three bodies lay on the ground.

"Let's get going. Who knows what the road will bring?" she wondered, climbing on.

"Yeah," Hermes replied.

Kino started the engine.





Chapter 8: Bodyguards -Standbys-

The gates were magnificent.

Inside was a facility for loading vehicles with fuel and water. An enormous trailer truck was parked there.

The trailer head was equipped with a front-facing bumper guard over the engine, designed to knock back and kill anything that got in its way. Behind the engine was the driver's seat and a small cabin where several people could sleep. Workmen were loading food onto the vehicle, which was essentially a home on wheels.

Four large containers were connected to the trailer head. It all looked like a short cargo train. Each container had eight wheels on either side, half-shielded with plate metal. None of the containers had any windows.

A walkway strip and handrails ran down the center of the roof of the first container. Standing there was a woman.

She was young, with long dark hair. The woman was dressed for mobility without sacrificing elegance, and was armed with a large-caliber revolver holstered on her right side. A rifle-type persuader was secured to her back.

A man stood on the roof of the next car. He was also young, slightly short but handsome. A slender automatic hand persuader was holstered at his left, and in his right hand was a large-caliber rifle equipped with a drum-shaped magazine.

"Master," he said to the woman, and cast his gaze downwards, "The client's daughter."

A young girl dressed in red stood beside the trailer head. She was glaring up at the woman.

The woman walked over to the roof of the trailer head and climbed down the ladder. She went to the girl and crouched down to her eye-level.

"Hello," she said.

The girl asked, "You're the bodyguards Father hired?"

Smiling, the woman said that they were.

“I don’t need bodyguards!” the girl spat.

The woman gently asked her why.

The girl replied, her eyes fixed straight ahead. “Because only God can decide our fate. If I die, or we all die, that will be His will. You’re going against what He wants.”

“You don’t mind if everyone else dies?”

“If it’s fate, I don’t,” the girl declared.

“It’s still our mission to protect you with our lives, Miss,” the woman said, never once losing her kindly smile.

The trailer was crossing the wilderness. All they could see for miles around were the blinding sun, the blue sky, the dry, red earth, the rocky mountains, and the clumps of grass dotting the landscape.

The trailer had been going without rest since dawn, the drivers taking shifts to keep them moving. It left a wake of dust longer than the length of all the containers put together.

The two bodyguards were on standby on the roofs of the containers, both wearing goggles and slinging persuaders behind their backs. They were secured to the trailers with ropes hooked onto the handrails on the containers.

It was a little past noon.

“Master! Ten o’clock direction!” the man cried. He quickly readied his rifle.

About twenty cars were approaching from ahead, clouds of dust riding behind them. Modified miniature buggies, loaded with men armed with persuaders.

The trailer accelerated. Black smoke spewed out of the exhaust chimney as the train of containers charged relentlessly forward.

The attackers surrounded the trailer and opened fire. The bullets bounced off the trailer. The male bodyguard put his rifle on the cushion secured to the handrail and pulled the trigger.

There was a deafening boom as a shell casing leapt into the air. One of the

buggies screeched to a stop, steam rising from the engine. Three more shots. Three more stopped buggies. The other buggies fell back slightly.

That was when the trailer slowed to avoid a pit. The train of containers twisted like a snake. One of the buggies took advantage of the opening, pushing against the trailer and sending sparks flying. One of the attackers leapt onto the trailer head and grabbed the ladder.

“I’ll take care of him,” said the female bodyguard, heading to the trailer head with one hand pulling her hook along.

The attacker climbed up. A window on the trailer head opened and someone leaned out. The attacker immediately guarded, but when he realized that it was a little girl, he grabbed her by the collar.

“C’mere!”

He dragged the girl outside with a single hand, and forced her onto the roof. The girl seemed to be in pain.

The attacker held the girl with his right hand and put a persuader to her head with his left.

“Stop,” the female bodyguard demanded, pointing her revolver from atop the container.

“Perfect timing!” the attacker grinned, “Get in there and tell the driver to stop this truck!”

The trailer accelerated again. The wind howled even more loudly.

“Snap to it! Or the girl loses her head!”

The attacker pushed the muzzle of the persuader against the girl’s head. As if on cue, her calm broke.

“NO! I don’t want to die, please! Don’t! Let me go! Let me go! I don’t want to die! Help me!” she cried, eyes wide and face pale. Each time she shook her head and squirmed, droplets of tears scattered into the air.

The woman said coolly,

“I suppose I have no choice.”

She holstered her revolver, unhooked herself from the handrails, and moved over to the trailer head.

“Please...” the girl squeaked, crying, as the woman walked past them.

The woman grinned.

“Hurry it up!” the attacker barked, turning his gun on the woman.

A second later, the woman grabbed the cylinder of his revolver. Now he could not cock the persuader, which meant it could not fire. Horror spread over his face, and holes were driven into his right shoulder. Blood spewed from them.

Confused, the attacker looked down at his own right shoulder. The woman snatched the girl from his grip with ease.

Two cars behind them, the male bodyguard was pointing his automatic hand persuader, a model with a square-shaped barrel. He opened fire.

The bullet pierced the attacker’s knee. His leg bent powerlessly. Staggering, he rolled off the roof. There was a look of disbelief on his face for two seconds before he hit the ground.

His limbs splaying in unnatural directions, the attacker disappeared into the dust behind them.

The buggies were retreating. The woman cast them one last glance before pulling the sniffling girl into a hug.

The next morning.

The trailer safely passed through the gates of a large country and stopped at the plaza just inside.

Local workmen began to unload the cargo. They opened the container doors and pulled on the chains inside by car, hauling out the fettered people inside.

The people were covered in vomit and feces. Other workmen sprayed them with water. Anyone who could not walk was expertly unbound, dragged to a large pit nearby, and shot in the back of the head before being dropped inside.

The bodyguards had just unloaded their things when the client, his wife, and their only daughter came up to them.

Beaming, the client thanked the bodyguards profusely and offered a handshake.

The client's wife gave their awkward daughter a gentle push.

The girl in red went up to the female bodyguard, who knelt on one leg, and said quietly but clearly:

"Thank you for rescuing me."

The female bodyguard smiled just as kindly as she had before.

"You're very welcome. But remember, it was your God who saved you, not me. He didn't want you to die yet."

The girl gave the female bodyguard a hug. She returned it and gave the girl a gentle pat on the back. The sound of gunshots broke the air.

The female bodyguard asked the client if they needed protection on the way back. The client replied that their containers were empty and that the route they planned was unknown to their enemies, so they did not need any bodyguards. But he asked her if they wanted a ride back as well.

The woman asked the client about the route before declining, saying she wanted to go back immediately.

"So that's the route they're using. I'll thank you for that," the man said to the two former bodyguards.

The man and the others glaring at the duo were the attackers who had assaulted the trailer by buggy.

He was the leader of the crew, standing in a hideout inside the rocky mountains in the desert.

"Now if you'll give us our compensation, we'll be on our way," said the woman. The leader stopped her.

"You killed one of us. Why?"

"You hired us to find out which way the trailer would be coming back. If we wanted to accomplish that mission, we had to kill him. He didn't stick to the plan," the woman said matter-of-factly. she could hear grinding teeth.

“He was a brave man,” said the leader, “He had everyone’s respect. And he was my brother. The only person in my family those bastards didn’t manage to kill.”

“Really?” the woman said, disinterested. The men brandished their weapons, glaring. That was when the partner took off his jacket.

“Wow, it’s hot in here.”

Wrapped around him were rectangular plastic bombs shaped like wads of clay. Silence fell over the hideout.

“...Enough. Take this and go. We can take care of the rest ourselves.”

The woman counted her pay and turned. She walked away.

The former bodyguards were crossing the desert in a small, rickety car. The barrel of a rifle stuck out the window; there was not enough space for it.

The woman was driving. Her partner was taking bites out of the portable rations wrapped around him, making a face like he was eating clay. When he offered one to the woman, she refused.

“Master,” he said.

“Yes?”

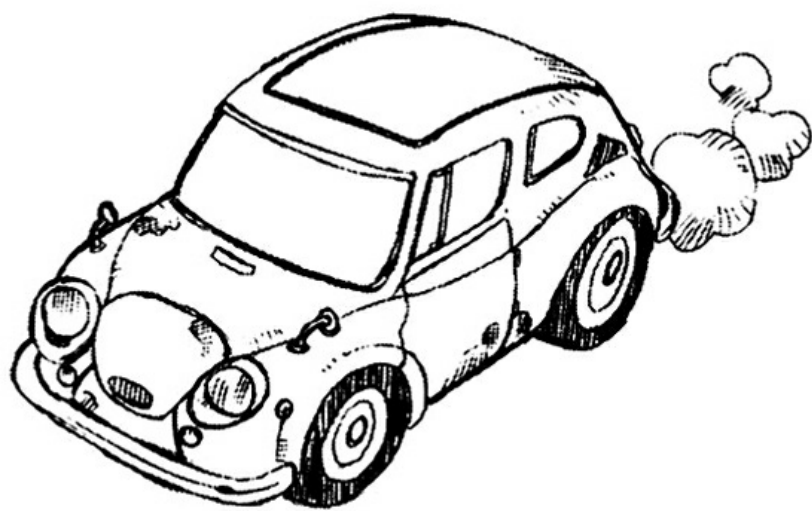
Several seconds of silence passed.

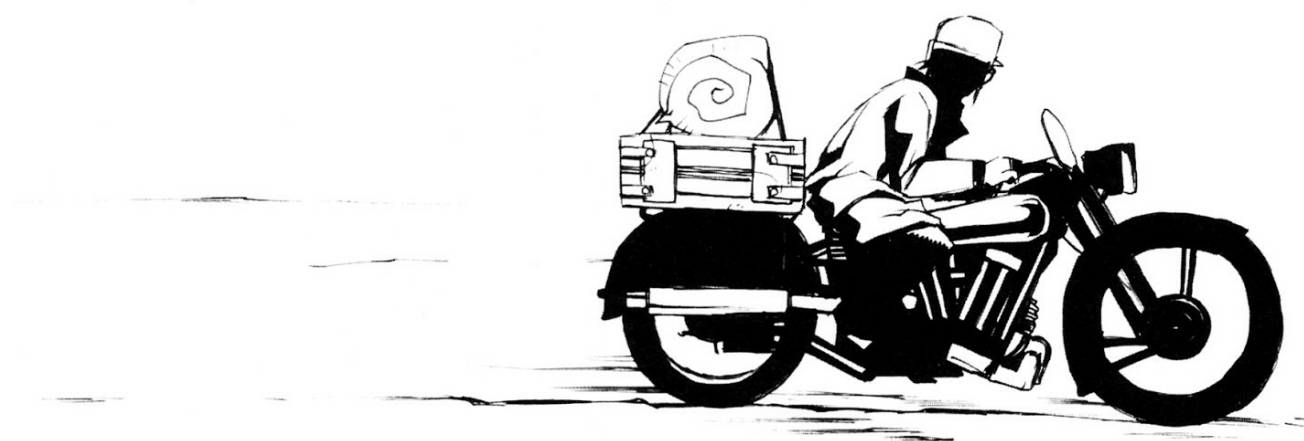
“They’ll attack the trailer, won’t they?”

“Of course,” the woman replied without a hint of concern.

“Is that all right?” the man asked.

The woman did not answer.





Chapter 9: The Story of the Salt Fields -Family Business-

A lone motorrad was crossing a world of white.

It was blinding, brilliant, and endlessly flat.

The land was made of salt.

Hard, dry salt encrusted the ground like a massive glacier. The salt field stretched on to the horizon in all directions.

The sun was shining in the clear, spotless blue sky.

The motorrad was headed due west, with nothing standing in its way. Compartments hung from either side of its rear wheel, atop which was stacked a suitcase and a sleeping bag, along with fuel and water.

The rider was wearing a brown coat with the ends wrapped around her thighs. On her head was a hat with ear flaps. A pair of goggles with yellow lenses and a bandanna shielded her face from the searing sunlight.

A rifle-type persuader on a leather strap hung from her neck in front of her. It was long and slender with a wooden stock and a scope.

“Behind us, Kino. Seven o’clock direction,” the motorrad said suddenly over the roar of the engine.

Kino slowed slightly and looked back.

“I can’t see. How far?”

“Pretty far. They’re on normal horses. They look pretty desperate to catch up, although they won’t,” the motorrad replied.

“Then we’ll lose them, Hermes.”

“Yeah.”

Kino let loose. The motorrad accelerated, although the unchanging landscape made it hard to tell.

“So the information was right,” said Kino.

“Yeah. They really did show up,” Hermes replied, sounding entertained.

Kino rode until the sun set.

Once it was too dark to see into the distance, she stopped on the salt flats to set up camp.

She dug deep into the hard salt, parked Hermes a slight distance away, and built a campfire in the pit with a lump of solid fuel.

Then she lay her persuader by her head and fell asleep under a blanket of stars.

The next day.

Kino and Hermes continued westward towards the horizon.

The landscape had not changed in the least. The sky was clear and cloudless, without even the slightest breeze. When Kino shut down Hermes’ engine for a short break, the silence was deafening.

They continued on their way, until Hermes spoke up around noon.

“Again. Eight o’clock direction, Kino. By car this time.”

Kino looked back. She could see a dot in the distance. It was slowly growing larger.

“You think they’ll catch up?” she wondered.

“Yeah. The car’s faster,” Hermes concluded.

Kino shook her head.

“Well?” he asked.

Kino set the accelerator and took her hand off it to release the safety on her persuader.

“I knew it.”

“I don’t have much of a choice, Hermes. I don’t know why they attack travelers—and I’d love to know, but this is all I can do right now.”

Putting her hands back on the handlebars, Kino looked back again.

The car was even closer on their heels. A wisp of white smoke suddenly rose from it.

“They’re shooting, Kino!”

“I know. But they’re too far. If they make a shot from this range...”

“Yeah?”

Kino smiled. “Then they’re really lucky.”

“This is no time for jokes, Kino. You have to fight back,” Hermes pleaded. She told him to wait.

The car drew even closer. More wisps of smoke rose from it, signaling gunfire. Kino pressed forward, pausing on occasion to look back.

“All right. Now!”

Without warning, Kino let go of the gas and swerved left. Hermes’ left flank was completely exposed.

“What are you doing, Kino? You’re practically asking them to hit me,” Hermes complained. Kino said nothing, setting the accelerator again and letting go of the handlebars. In the blink of an eye, she picked up her persuader, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

The car’s right tire burst. Shreds of rubber went flying in every direction.

Kino grabbed Hermes’ handlebars again and swerved right.

The car’s wheel leaned forward and the front bumper hit the ground, leaving a long gash in the salt flats. The driver did not turn the steering wheel in time; the car tipped over on its side, spilling some of its passengers to the ground.

“It’s stopped,” Hermes said.

“Then it’s time to make our getaway.”

Kino accelerated.

The next day, Kino and Hermes continued down the salt flats.

In the north and south, they could make out distant mountain peaks rising like islands. But there was still nothing to be seen in the west.

Hermes spoke up around noon.

“Ahead of us, Kino.”

Slowing down, Kino asked Hermes what he saw. He paused briefly before answering.

“I can’t tell. Maybe they’re trees? They’re standing in a line. I don’t see any people, though.”

Kino pushed herself up on her seat curiously. She eventually spotted a long dark line, hazy in the distance. As they made a cautious approach, Kino realized that it was a line of stakes driven into the salt. She stopped.

The stakes were about the height of a child, driven at intervals just narrow enough to prevent cars from passing through. The long line across the salt flats started in the southeast and headed west.

“Wonder what these are,” Hermes said.

Kino was clueless. “I’m not sure. Maybe they’re signposts? But they’re stuck too close together for that.”

“No one said anything about them?”

“No. They only told me about the attackers.”

“Huh.”

“Oh well. We have to go west anyway, so let’s follow the stakes for now.”

Kino started Hermes. He advised her to not follow blindly, in case the line led in a completely different direction later.

Soon, they spotted someone.

Hermes saw him first and warned Kino. She released the safety on her persuader.

A small vehicle loaded with stakes was parked ahead. Beside it was an older man with bronzed skin, wearing a pair of sunglasses. He was hammering stakes into the ground with intense concentration.

The man turned when he heard the engine. From his perspective, Hermes seemed to pop out from behind his truck.

“Hello.” “Hello.” Kino and Hermes greeted the shocked man.

The man raised his hammer. Kino pointed her persuader. He ground his teeth and lowered the hammer, roaring, “Damn you! You can kill me, but you can’t take this property! It’s mine, I tell you!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. We’re not here to take anything from you,” Kino said as she pulled down her bandanna, waiting for the man to finish.

The man accused her of playing dumb.

Kino politely explained that she did not want to do him any harm or take anything away, and asked him to calm down.

“So you’re traveling, just passing through here?” the man said, his anger finally subsiding.

“That’s correct. We have no intention of settling here or taking anything from you,” Kino said. She had slung her persuader behind her back and left her coat unbuttoned to reassure him.

“All right, that’s fine, I suppose,” the man said, “But I do think I deserve an apology, the way you just rolled into my property.”

“Your property?” asked Hermes.

“That’s right, everything north of this here line,” the man said, pointing at the stakes. Kino and Hermes were standing south of it.

“Er...this is your property?” Kino asked.

The man was incredulous. “You’re damn right it is.”

“But what’s there to own?” asked Hermes.

The man shook his head. “Like rider, like motorrad. Stupid, the both of you. I’m talking about the land.”

“But there’s nothing but salt here,” Hermes pointed out.

“Precisely. This here salt’s my livelihood! You’re telling me you’ve been coming all the way through the fields without even knowing that?”

“I’m afraid I had no idea,” Kino said with as much courtesy as she could

muster, "Could you please enlighten us?"

The man snorted. "Heh. Can't fault you for honesty. Guess I'll have to make a special exception. See, I used to be a traveler. Or, we used to be. There were about a dozen of us."

"Really?" asked Hermes.

"We got sick of our homeland, so we packed up and left town. We had a few cars and a few horses."

"And then what happened?"

"None of the countries we visited, well, none of them would accept us. We were just wandering for heaven knows how long. Tired, exhausted, angry at each other and broke. We even considered banditry. That's when fortune smiled on us."

"How?" Hermes asked.

"Do I have to spell out every last thing for you? This field! We made it to the promised land here, see?" the man declared. "We got salt here and started selling it to the countries in the north and south. Paid real well, I have to tell you. We got paid a fortune for carting around this stuff. Didn't need to find a country to live in, no sir. We could just buy all the food and fuel we needed from the countries with the money we made from the salt. Been living like that ever since."

"I get it now. But where's everyone else?" asked Hermes. The man snorted again.

"Them? Broke off."

"Why?"

"Cause I got sick of their shenanigans."

"What kind of shenanigans?"

"Things were all right for a while. But then they split into groups and started trying to take all the salt for themselves. Sure, they were talking nice about unity and fraternity. But they were trying to drive us like slaves behind our backs. We had a falling-out after that and split. We'd all get a chunk of the land

and sell to whatever country we liked. I tell you, I'd have turned into one of those underhanded cowards if I'd stayed. Good riddance."

"So your old companions are scattered around the fields, mining for salt. And that's why they attacked everyone on sight," Kino concluded.

Hermes whispered, "Now we know why travelers kept getting attacked here."

"That's right. Did you meet 'em?" asked the man.

"Yes. They opened fire without warning."

"Can't expect anything less than stupidity from those noggins. Probably assumed I sent you or something. Dunderheads, every last one of 'em. They've been dunderheads since they could barely talk."

Kino was surprised. "You've known them that long?"

"Course I have. They're my sons. All five of 'em. Their wives and kids are with them too. I was traveling with my family, see."

Kino and Hermes were silenced.

"They've got no sense, none of them. Just digging up the salt without any plans, not planting stakes and drawing up lines like their clever old man. Attacking anybody they spot. And somehow they can still live with themselves, the monsters," the man spat.

"Thank you for all the information. On that note, could I ask for your permission?" Kino asked.

"Permission for what?" asked the man.

"We'd like to ask for permission to cross your land as we head west. And although we had no idea, Hermes and I intruded on your property on our way here. We're very sorry, and want to ask for your forgiveness."

"Hmph. Should have been that polite from the beginning, and I might not have gotten angry. All right. You've got my permission," the man said.

"Thank you for your kind understanding. If you'll excuse us."

"Bye now. Do your best."

"Don't need you to tell me that."

Kino pulled her bandanna over her face again and climbed onto Hermes. She started the engine and took off.

Once the motorrad was gone, the man planted another stake in the salt field.





Chapter 10: The Country with an Illness -For You-

Inside the walls was no different from outside. A dead wasteland littered with rocky brown mountains.

The walls were simply there, as if they had risen out of the ground. On either side were monotonous landscapes that seemed to go on forever.

The sky was blindingly clear. A lone road stretched into the distance, not paved but cleared of obstacles and patted down.

A motorrad was moving down the road, leaving the rising sun and a trail of reddish-brown dust in its wake. It was equipped with a luggage rack in place of a back seat, and was laden with a suitcase and a sleeping bag. Black compartments hung from either side of the rear wheel.

The rider was wearing a hat with ear flaps and a bill, along with a pair of silver-rimmed goggles that were peeling at the edges. The edges of her long brown coat were wrapped securely around her thighs.

“It’s cold here, Kino. Not just the weather,” the motorrad remarked.

Kino replied, “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Did we really come inside? This doesn’t look like a country.”

“Yeah. If you could count automated entry procedures as immigrations, I mean.”

“Huh. Maybe the people left their homes to go live in caves. That might be funny too.”

“But that’s the thing, Hermes. I heard this country was technologically advanced. That it was clean and tidy, and you could live indoors your entire life,” Kino said.

Hermes was unconvinced. “They must have gotten it confused with some other place.”

“No, I heard about it from someone who left because it was too clean. But he didn’t tell me about the automated entry procedures. All he said was that I’d

see the walls in the middle of the wasteland, and a dome with high-rise buildings.”

“I don’t see any of those.”

“Yeah...”

Kino slowed as she turned, and accelerated along the straight stretches of the road. They passed one rocky peak and spotted another behind it.

“You think we’re lost?” Hermes wondered, bored.

“No,” Kino said firmly.

The exchange repeated itself several times, and Hermes finally went silent. He drove on in complete silence in the unchanging world.

It was around noon when they finally spotted the walls they were looking for. Kino and Hermes had just emerged from behind a particularly large peak.

“See?”

“You’re right. He was telling the truth after all.”

In the middle of the desert were walls, high-rise buildings, and a dome.

The old stone walls were coated with a reflective surface. Three buildings loomed behind them, surrounded by smaller structures. The buildings were connected via walkways. The entire city was encased in a transparent dome. It was like a massive fortress.

Uniformed soldiers and an officer were waiting for Kino at the gates. They greeted her with smiles.

When Kino explained that she wanted to stay for three days, they welcomed her, offering to fully cover the costs of her stay on the condition that she, Hermes, and her belongings were thoroughly sterilized before entry. Kino asked how the procedure went.

“You will be required to enter a shower, during which time your belongings will be cleaned. your motorrad will be washed as well. The procedure for your belongings will be thorough—it will go through everything from entire bags to even individual needles. Of course, we will make a catalogue of your belongings

beforehand to make sure nothing is lost.”

Kino thought for a moment and accepted the terms. Hermes was a little disgruntled, but he surrendered as well.

Some time passed. Kino and Hermes entered through the gates, having completed the entry procedures.

Kino was in her jacket, with a thick belt around her waist and holsters on her right thigh and behind her back. They were all pristine.

Her dusty old coat was as good as new, tied to the suitcase on the luggage rack.

Hermes had been fully sterilized and polished to a sheen. The metal parts were shone as bright as mirrors.

“I’ve never felt so clean in my entire life,” Kino muttered, standing before a mirror, “I feel spotless.”

“What do you say to settling here for good, Kino? I’m sick of dirt stains,” Hermes said. The last set of gates opened.

“Welcome to the City. This is where most of our population lives,” said the guide who had been waiting just inside.

The City was tidy and orderly, with paved districts and roads lined with buildings. The transparent dome covered the entire area from about 40 floors above the ground.

“The glass dome and the windows in our buildings block out harmful elements of sunlight. All light and air in our country is strictly filtered and controlled, and the temperature and humidity are artificially kept at standard levels according to the time and location. Aren’t you feeling a little warm?”

“You’re right,” Kino replied, opening up her jacket.

“And these are for Hermes,” the guide said, taking out two box-shaped objects the size of dictionaries. Kino asked what they were.

“It’s an exhaust filter,” Hermes commented, “and a muffler. I knew you’d give me those.”

Kino stared in surprise. The guide equipped the items onto Hermes with an expert hand.

“Now Hermes is legally allowed to run in our country, even indoors where permitted. You’ll find elevators in the buildings for your convenience. And here is a map of the City. Please return it at the gates upon departure.”

“Thank you.”

Kino looked at the little machine. The screen displayed her current location, along with an instruction manual.

The guide continued, “You must have seen the outer wall already. We built it about ten years ago as part of our expansion plans. You’re standing in what we call the City, which is the old country, with the new territory outside the dome being called the Country.”

“You mean people live out there?” Hermes asked.

“Yes, but very few,” replied the guide. “You’ll find a few villages scattered about with a few dozen people in each settlement. They’re our Pioneers, all volunteers who work the land to make it usable.”

“Why would they choose to go out there? The City seems comfortable enough,” Kino wondered.

The guide smiled. “Precisely. It’s very comfortable here. Everything is developed and clean. But that’s why some people choose to pursue nature; living on real soil under real sunlight.”

“I see.”

“Pioneers are sent in family units. It’s an honor afforded only to the select few who pass the physical and psychological examinations, and the training to settle the land. And they are accompanied by our military’s special forces, who have also passed a rigorous selection process. The land they clear is used for agriculture, and the Pioneers build self-sufficient villages there. This is still a long ways off, but we plan to develop these settlements in a different way from the City. The settlement project is also an experiment of sorts to see if our people could become strong enough to survive in the outside world once more, as we had before we built the City.”

“I see.”

“So I suppose you could see the Pioneers as our cream of the crop, so to speak. We admire them very much—just imagine living in harmony with nature, building a new country... But it’s for braver people than myself. I’d faint if I ever saw a lizard or a moth,” the guide said, chuckling, “The whole country will be impressed by you as well, Kino and Hermes. People will ask you to join them for meals, or talk to you out of the blue. Please enjoy your stay. And if you’re not sure whether to accept an invitation or not, you are free to decide based on the person’s looks or their choice of menu.”

“More like choice of menu and how much food they offer,” Hermes quipped.

They left the guide at the gates and headed into the city proper.

The streets were spotless.

Kino and Hermes were invited to meals twelve times before they reached the hotel. She turned them all down.

The hotel was in one of the tallest high-rises. Kino and Hermes were led into the glass elevator and a suite on the top floor with a fantastic view of the Country.

“This place is huge,” Kino mumbled once the bellboy was gone. “What am I supposed to do with all this space?”

“It’s perfect for marksmanship practice,” said Hermes.

Kino was unloading her things from Hermes when the call bell went off. A middle-aged man and woman in formalwear appeared on the large screen on the wall.

“Good day, Traveler,” said the man, “I am the owner of this hotel. My wife and I have an urgent request to make of you. Would you please spare us some of your time?”

Kino invited the couple inside. After a moment’s hesitation, she offered them the seats at a nearby table. The couple sat down, thanking her.

The owner first introduced himself, then asked, “If I may, would you care to join us for lunch tomorrow?” He and his wife both looked very serious.

Kino declined the offer, but they begged her to accept. They offered to give her anything for her time.

When Kino asked why they were so desperate, the woman answered, “We have an ill daughter. She’s been sick for a very long time. Please tell her stories from your travels.”

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn.

She began with light exercises. Then she did drawing practice with Cannon and Woodsman. Afterwards, she took apart the persuaders, cleaned and oiled them, and took a shower in the needlessly large bathroom.

Just as the sun began to rise, Kino called for room service. A luxurious meal, courtesy of the owner and his wife, was delivered to her suite.

After breakfast, Kino watched in vexation as the bellboy took away the leftovers.

“You have to let these things go sometimes, Kino. Your stomach’s not a bottomless pit,” Hermes said, having woken up at some point.

Kino rode through the City. Hermes showered the buildings and streets with praise.

“Hm. Yeah,” Kino replied, not sounding particularly interested.

Even as they toured the area, locals invited them to meals or struck up conversations. Kino declined them all, citing her prior engagement.

Around lunchtime, they arrived at the place the hotel owner had marked on the electronic map. It was a large white building rather far from the city center. The area had been left relatively clear to keep the space open. The name ‘First National Hospital’ was written on a sign at the front.

The owner and his wife greeted Kino and Hermes at the doors. Kino took off her hat and greeted the grateful couple, and was led to their daughter’s room.

The room was furnished with wooden decorations steeped in history and majesty. It had been lifted straight out of a luxury mansion.

In the middle of the room was a large bed with high posts, a roof, and lace curtains. A girl in her early teens sat on the edge of the mattress.

She had pale skin. Most people in this country had fair complexions, but hers was even whiter—the hue of bleached paper. Her long blond hair hung down all the way to the bed, and her blue eyes highlighted her emaciated face.

The girl wore blue-and-red tomato-patterned pajamas and a light pink cardigan. And she wore a smile on her face as she looked at the letter in her hands.

There was a knock. The girl carefully folded up the letter, put it in its envelope, and placed the envelope in a box by her pillow.

“Come in,” she finally said, and the door opened on command.

“My name is Kino. And this is my partner Hermes,” Kino said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Kino. Hermes. I’m Inertia. Mother told me that you’d be coming today. Thank you so much.”

The girl rose, curtsying with her fingers holding up a nonexistent dress.

“Thank you for the invitation,” Kino responded, putting a hand over her chest and bowing. She was in her white shirt, with her holstered persuaders wrapped up in her jacket and tied to Hermes’ luggage rack. She propped him up on his center stand before the bed and took a seat.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hermes said, “Kino’s getting some hoity-toity food and new ammunition, and I’m getting high-quality oil, plugs, and fuel. You scratch our rims, and we’ll scratch yours.”

Inertia broke into a smile. “I’m a little surprised. I thought someone traveling on a motorrad would be a lot wilder, and older.”

“Kino is definitely a wild one,” Hermes joked. Kino gave a wry laugh.

“Will you please tell me about your travels?” Inertia asked, eyes wide.

“Yes. That’s what I’m here for,” Kino replied.

Lunch was delivered to the room. Kino, Inertia, and Inertia’s parents ate together.

The entire family listened with rapt attention as Kino told her stories.

After the meal, the couple reluctantly left for work, leaving Kino and Hermes

with their daughter.

Kino and Inertia sat around the table, with Hermes propped up to the side. Fruit had been served on a platter, along with tea.

“Thank you for coming all this way and taking the time to tell me your stories,” Inertia said, “I loved them. I’m sure everyone else would have loved to hear them too.”

Kino shook her head. “It was no problem. Remember what Hermes said before?”

“But other people might have given you even more for your stories,” Inertia said, apologetic.

“Or maybe less. If we’d turned down your parents, we might be off somewhere regretting it.”

“Yeah,” Hermes chimed in. “And you’ve been sick for two whole years, so you deserve a bit of fun.”

A smile slowly came over Inertia’s face.

“Did they tell you anything about my illness?” she asked.

Kino replied, “Yes, your father did. About how there’s no cure or prevention for this disease, and how it could affect anyone. But they’ve found ways to slow down the progress recently, right? He also said that they’re working on a cure, and it’ll be finished soon.”

“Yes. I’ll start taking the medicine once they’re done. I’ll be able to go home and attend school again.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Maybe my classmates will remember me, or maybe they won’t. It might be a bit overwhelming at first, but I’m sure I’ll be hanging out with other kids soon. But I can’t just spend all my time relaxing. I have to study hard so I can go out into the Country. I’ll build up my strength, too.”

“You want to go out there?” Hermes asked.

Inertia nodded, smiling.

“You haven’t told your parents, have you?” Kino guessed.

“No, I haven’t. How did you know?”

“Because you didn’t let it show at all when I was talking about the Country before. Your parents looked like they were more interested than you. Like they were sick of work and wanted to leave it all behind.”

Inertia laughed. “You might be right. Mother and Father always wanted to try living in the outside world. But they have a hotel to run. I can’t imagine what they’ll say if I tell them I want to go to the Country.”

“Do you want to become a farmer?” asked Kino.

“Yes, but...it’s more because there’s someone I want to meet. Someone I just have to thank.”

“Your parents don’t know about this person, do they?” asked Hermes.

“No,” Inertia said softly.

“Who is it? What’re they like?” Hermes said, curious.

“Er...I’ll only tell you if you promise not to tell my parents. Or anyone else.”

“That’s fine. It’ll be our little secret.” “Yeah.”

Life rose to Inertia’s face. She rose and walked over to her bed, opening up the box next to her pillow and taking out a dictionary-shaped book. It was a journal with a sturdy cover and a lock.

Inertia unlocked the journal and opened it up. Letters were stuck in between some of the pages.

“These are from my pen pal in the Country.”

“Is it a boy? Or a girl?” asked Hermes.

“A boy,” Inertia said clearly. “His name is Logue, and he’s the same age as me. Right now he’s living on a farm in the Country with his family. They’re all Pioneers.”

“Is he a school friend? I heard it’s very hard to be chosen as a Pioneer,” Kino

said.

Inertia shook her head. “We met here at the hospital last year. He came to get a checkup with his family when they applied to become Pioneers. I was looking out at the Country from the observation deck when he ran in. He was pointing outside and yelling, ‘Just you wait! I’m gonna make it out there!’”

“Huh.”

“He wasn’t actually supposed to be there. I was really surprised. The nurses came and tried to drag him away, but I kind of ended up telling them that he was my friend and he was allowed to be there.”

“Not bad,” Hermes said.

Inertia smiled sheepishly. “He thanked me, and we looked out at the Country together for a really long time. He said it was his dream to live there, and told me all about what he wanted to do. So we made a promise. He’d do his best and pass all the exams and make it to the Country, and I’d do my best and get healthy again.”

“So that’s how you started writing to each other.”

“Yes. Just one letter a month, so we wouldn’t bother each other. But in the second letter, he told me that his family passed the exams, and they were going to help build a new settlement outside! I was so happy. Dreams really do come true if you work hard enough,” she said, her blue eyes brimming with hope, “So he moved to the Country. He wrote to me after that. He said living in the Country was much harder than he imagined, but he was going to do his best. And he kept writing to me every month. Three months ago, he said that someone had a baby. It was the first baby born in the village. Two months ago, he said a bug flew in while they were eating but he wasn’t scared. And just the other day, he said they planted fifty-three tomato seedlings in the greenhouse and he’s looking after them every day, and how fun it was. Logue’s dream came true. And he’s doing his best out there. So I have to do my best too. My medicine makes me feel queasy, but I read Logue’s letters when that happens. He gives me courage. People might be helpless when they’re alone, but I think they can do anything as long as they encourage each other!”

“That’s right,” Hermes said sagely, “Which is why you should find yourself

someone like that soon, Kino.”

“None of your business,” Kino replied. They burst into laughter.

Inertia said, “Once I’m better, I want to get permission to visit the Country. I want to go see Logue and look around the village, and try the tomatoes they grew in the ground. That’s my dream right now.”

“I really hope they finish that cure soon.” “Yeah,” said Kino and Hermes.

“Yes. I’m going to get better no matter what. I think the harder you work at something, the better things get in the future. I’m sure I’ll be healthy again someday. I have to be.”

“Can I ask you to do something for me, Kino?” Inertia said.

The winter sun was starting to set, and the dome was adjusting itself automatically in response.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you ever since Mother told me you were coming. I know this might be too much to ask, but I don’t have anyone else to count on,” she said, biting her lip.

“What is it? That fancy food’s put me in a really good mood, so I think I’m up for just about anything. And my trusty motorrad’s always ready to help,” Hermes said.

Kino punched Hermes’ fuel tank and asked Inertia what she wanted.

“You’re going to head west when you leave the country tomorrow, right? Well, Logue’s village is on the way, but a little further south.”

“I see,” said Kino.

Inertia looked her in the eye. “I actually wanted to give him a present before he left.”

Inertia reached into her box again and took out a small case, tiny enough to fit on the palm of her hand. She opened it.

Inside was a brooch. It was carved of some white material, slightly distorted but clearly in the shape of a bird. Short golden feathers decorated its beak and wings.

“Did you make this yourself?” asked Kino.

“Yes. I made it as small as I could, but it just wouldn’t fit in the envelope. Could you take this brooch to Logue, please? It’s a good-luck charm. I made it so the farms would do well, and so he won’t get hurt or sick. Please take this to the post office in his village. I know this might take you out of your way, but you’re my only hope. Please.”

Kino stared at the brooch for some time.

“I can’t refuse a request like that.” “Yeah. We would have if you asked us to take the bed over, though,” said Kino and Hermes.

The nurse came in just as a teary-eyed Inertia thanked Kino and Hermes. She seemed surprised to see the visitors.

After giving Inertia her medicine, the nurse heard about Kino and Hermes leaving the next day and begged them to join her family for lunch.

Kino shook her head.

“I’m terribly sorry, but we’re planning to visit the Country tomorrow. There’s a village with a tomato garden we want to see.”

The next day. It was the third day since Kino and Hermes’ arrival.

Kino rose at dawn.

The sky outside the window was clear, glowing a pale purple. The Country was just as empty as before.

In the elevator to her suite, Kino found the ammunition, rations, and everything else she had asked for. All her clothes had been laundered to perfection, and she even found some new clothes in the pile. She had replaced Hermes’ plugs, fuel, and oil the previous night.

As usual, Kino started off with exercises and persuader drills. Then she thoroughly enjoyed her shower and feasted on her breakfast.

She checked out of the hotel at sunrise. The owner and his wife came to see her off, thanking her profusely for brightening up Inertia’s day.

Kino and Hermes left the hotel, going down the nearly-deserted streets.

They reached the western gates of the City, returned the electronic map, and prepared to leave. Kino checked that her persuaders were loaded before putting on her coat. She also returned the exhaust filter because it would not last long anyway.

Finally, she checked one more time to make sure she had not left anything. Coming back into the City would be too much trouble. Kino reached into her jacket to make sure she had brought the gift.

Outside the walls, a cold gust kicked up dust into the air.

Kino asked the guard outside the gates for directions. He showed her a map, which she and Hermes scrutinized before setting off.

The lone motorrad was crossing the desert.

“You think you can figure out how to get there?” Hermes asked.

Kino replied, “Yeah. It’s not marked, but the topography’s easy to remember. There’s a two-peaked mountain about 60 kilometers ahead. Past that is a basin with Pioneer Settlement #42. The path there was on the map too.”

“Why wasn’t the village on the map, though?”

“Maybe the map was out of date. We’ll find out when we get there,” Kino concluded.

“Right,” Hermes said, and added, “I wonder how Logue’ll react when we give him Inertia’s present.”

“We’ll find that out too when we get there.”

“Right.”

Kino accelerated. They continued westward with the morning sun at their back.

Along the way, they spotted a great green circle by the road. It was part of a Pioneer settlement; a field watered by a giant sprinkler.

The sun climbed higher and higher into the sky, until their shadows were tiny on the ground.

“Here,” Kino said, stopping Hermes. To their left was a path snaking up a two-

peaked mountain.

“It’s not a very friendly road. Those pebbles are going to dent my frame.”

“That’s nothing new.”

Rear wheel spinning loudly, Hermes turned and climbed at full speed.

“You’re such a softie, Kino.”

“I owe her this much for all the great food. I wouldn’t have helped out otherwise.”

“Really?”

The road reached a plateau that went on for some time. Then it began to descend.

“There.” “I see it.”

Several buildings stood in a cluster in a corner of the wide basin. Half-worked fields spread out in a grid around them, and greenhouses stood reflecting the sunlight off the glass walls.

“Something’s not right,” Kino muttered.

She stood before a building in the village, looking at the door.

“No one here, either?” Hermes asked from the road.

“No. The door’s locked. Chained, too.”

The fields in the distance were just as deserted. No one came outside when Kino drew near, or when she entered the village. A lonely wind howled through the settlement.

“The buildings are still in good shape, and the crops have been harvested, too,” Kino remarked.

“Maybe the whole village packed up and left? This area might not have worked out after all.”

“That’s not good. I’d have to find out where they moved to.”

“Look, Kino. A car,” Hermes said. Kino went back to the road and looked at the headlights coming from the other side of the basin.

The car quickly approached Kino and Hermes. A small four-wheel drive painted to match the color of the ground. Only one person was inside.

“Perfect timing. Let’s ask him.”

Kino waved. The car stopped and the driver emerged.

He was a soldier in his early twenties, wearing mirrored sunglasses and a green winter uniform like the men outside the City gates. On the left side of his belt was a holster, and on the back was a dagger sheathed horizontally.

“What is your business here? Oh, wait a second... Are you the traveler who came to our country two days ago?” asked the man.

“Yes. My name is Kino, and this is my partner Hermes.”

“Hi there.”

“Hello. Welcome to our country. I’m Lieutenant Cole, from the Third Special Security Squad,” the man said, saluting. “May I ask what your business is here? The New West Gate is the other way; this road takes you the long way round, about a two-day drive. Shall I take you to the main road?”

“Doesn’t anyone live here?” Kino asked.

“Not yet, I’m afraid. It’s a training center. A prototype for temporarily housing Pioneers,” Lieutenant Cole replied.

“That’s weird. Kino’s here to deliver something for someone who’s lived here for a year,” said Hermes.

Cole’s lip stiffened. “Name and address?”

“CO Post Office 42nd Pioneer Settlement. His name is—”

“Logue, right?” Lieutenant Cole finished, taking off his sunglasses to reveal eyes just as blue as Inertia’s.

The building was at the highest point in the area, a short distance from the village. A drab two-story concrete structure with a large antenna on the roof.

The car came to a quiet stop in front of the building. Kino and Hermes roared loudly behind it.

The lieutenant opened the door and beckoned Kino and Hermes inside.

The building was dark, but furnished like an office with small chairs, desks, and document trays. Lieutenant Cole offered Kino a seat. He hung up his hat and opened the sealed windows. Light spilled inside, revealing the tidy interior.

Kino propped up Hermes on his side stand and hung her hat and coat on him.

Lieutenant Cole sat across from Kino. He placed his elbows on his desk and clasped his hands before his forehead, closing his eyes with a sigh. It was long and quiet.

He finally raised his head and said feebly, "Welcome to the post office."

Kino reached into her jacket and took out a case small enough to fit on her palm. She opened it and showed Cole the object inside.

A small brooch carved of some white material, slightly distorted but clearly in the shape of a bird. Short golden feathers decorated its beak and wings.

"A good-luck charm. It's a gift from Inertia to Logue."

She placed the case on the desk. But Cole simply stared at it.

"Do you work here?" asked Kino.

"Yes. Out here in the Country, soldiers are in charge of non-security duties as well. I used to work here. I still do, I suppose."

"That's that, then. We did what Inertia asked. Let's get going, Kino," Hermes said, making no effort to hide his sarcasm.

"How could this happen...?" Cole groaned, shaking his head.

"Could you give this to Logue?" Kino asked.

Cole shook his head and said firmly, "I can't."

"Why not?" asked Hermes.

"Because Logue is dead. He died half a year ago—murdered. Exactly half a year and four days ago," Cole replied.

"Did they tell you about the disease, and how doctors are developing a cure?"

"Yes." "Yeah."

"And about the Pioneers?"

“Yes.” “Yeah.”

“But have they told you about the Special Pioneers?”

“No.” “What’s that?”

“To put simply...they were people recruited to be killed.”

“...Please, go on.”

“Of course. ...I’ll tell you everything I know. Our country...we’ve been working very hard to overcome this disease that’s been ravaging our people—or some of them, at any rate. It was our public enemy number one. So the entire country has been working to develop a cure as quickly as possible. Trying to prevent more people from suffering for years and dying in pain.”

“I see.” “Right.”

“And three years ago, we began to reach the limits of animal testing. Many doctors said we needed to move on to human experimentation. They implied that we could develop the cure faster if we used living people. And the government agreed.”

“...” “And then what happened?”

“All sorts of people apply to be Pioneers. Some of these families have no other relations, and are part of the lowest-income class. They were selected, regardless of their performances on the examinations, and made into a Pioneer group.”

“The Special Pioneers, you mean.”

“Yes. They came to this village, full of hope. We soldiers were in charge of keeping them safe and making sure none of them escaped. ...But you have to understand! The government hadn’t decided for sure that these people would be used for the experiments. The cure might have been completed before that, and then they could have lived like the other Pioneers.”

“I see.” “But that didn’t work out, did it?”

“The authorities made the decision a little more than half a year ago. All the villagers would be taken as test subjects. We carried out the orders. Released sleeping gas into the village one night and kidnapped them all. Put them in

trucks and shipped them off...and that's the last I saw of them. The last I saw of Logue, the boy who used to follow me around like a little brother. They were taken to an underground facility in the City for the experiments. I don't know the details. But a CO told me that half a year and four days ago, a boy was vivisected. Cut up and put in small specimen jars. Later they told us the doctors found a way to slow the disease, and gave us a reward. ...And no one's touched the village since."

"I see. I have one question." "About the letters, right?"

"Yes. I wrote the letters. I was in charge of checking them to make sure no one had any suspicions about our activities. Pioneers don't get many letters to begin with because so many people are envious of their status. And the Special Pioneers didn't have many contacts to begin with. So I didn't have much work to do. Or at least, that's what I thought at first."

"But..." "Yeah."

"But she wrote to him without missing a month. And he always wrote back. I could read their letters with a machine that let me see inside without breaking the seal. I found out that she was sick and couldn't leave her room. That he was encouraging her with all his heart. That she was encouraging him out here in the wilderness. And that her dream was to get better and move out here to the Country to be with him."

Without warning, Cole put his head in his hands. "I'm such an idiot! All I had to do was write one easy letter! 'I'm too busy to write back anymore'! It would have been so easy! I could have crumpled up her letters and ignored them! So why? Why did I keep replying?! What is wrong with me, dammit?!"

"So you couldn't stop, could you?" Hermes remarked, as unperturbed as ever.

"I was terrified! Month after month, I opened up her letters, scared that she might have written, 'Who are you?' on the pages. But..."

He finally looked up, his teary eyes locked on the little bird on the desk.

"She made it for you. Take it," Kino said quietly.

"Thank you." A soft response. "I'll have to write her back."

Cole took Inertia's gift in his hands. He gingerly closed the case and got up, putting the present on a shelf behind him.

"Say," Hermes said, once Cole was back in his seat, "If you're not demolishing the village, does that mean you're going to do the same thing again?"

Cole nodded. "Yes. They'll be sending a new batch of subjects soon. And I'll go back to doing security and postal duties here." His eyes narrowed. "This is all for the country. For our people. And...for her."

"I understand. Thank you for your explanation. If you'll excuse us, then."

Cole stared at Kino. "Thank you. And...I'm sorry."

He kicked the desk into Kino's chest. She fell on her back. By the time she had pushed the desk away, Cole's right foot was pinning Cannon to the floor, holster and all.

The blue-eyed soldier looked at his target. He followed his training, drawing his dagger and bringing it down with both hands.

Kino's right hand grabbed the knife hidden in her left sleeve.

Outside the walls was no different from inside. A dead wasteland littered with rocky brown mountains.

The walls were simply there, as if they had risen out of the ground. On either side were monotonous landscapes that seemed to go on forever.

The sky was blindingly clear. A lone road stretched into the distance, not paved but cleared of obstacles and patted down.

Kino and Hermes continued westward, leaving a trail of reddish-brown dust in their wake.

"I'm surprised, Kino," said Hermes.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. I mean, we were still in the country," Kino replied.

It had been ten days since the traveler's departure.

A girl with pale skin, blond hair, and blue eyes sat on the edge of her bed. The nurse came in to give her her medication. And a small envelope.

The nurse instructed the girl to take her medication first, and left the room.

The girl did as she was told.

Then she got a letter opener and carefully got into the envelope, which was only marked with the name of the hospital and her room number.

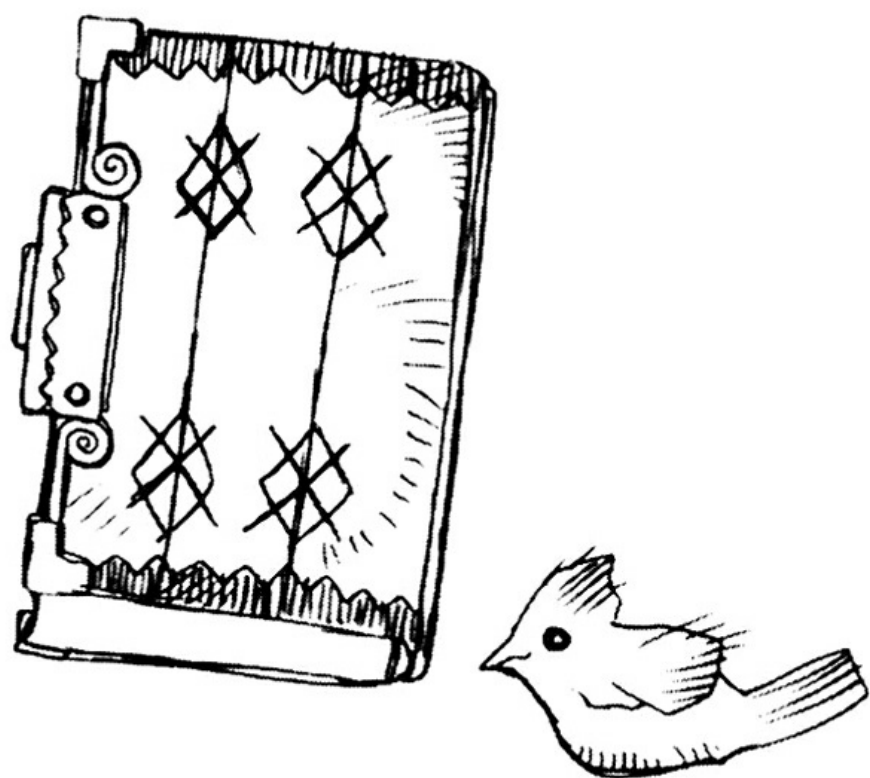
A checkered envelope stamped 'STERILIZED' and 'CHECKED' emerged. Emotions welling, she tore it open.

Inside she found a single piece of paper, folded very neatly.

Her blue eyes followed the words on the letter.

'Thank you so much for the present. I'll treasure it. Come to the village when you get better. There's so much I want to tell you.'

The girl smiled. Choking back a sob, she hugged the letter to her chest.



Epilogue: At Dusk - A - Will - A -

The sun was setting.

The perfectly circular ball of light was about to hide itself below the horizon. Above it to the right was a small red light, shining like a gemstone.

The spotless orange sky was giving way to blue, followed by purple.

The world was flat as a gentle sea, carpeted by early-summer grass and trees, and dotted with sparkling lakes.

A gentle wind brushed past the leaves.

The peak was too high to be a hill but too low to be a mountain. But it was the highest point in the west all the same. The view from the top was completely unobstructed.

It had been cleared of trees and crowned with a log watchtower.

At the feet of the tower was a large log cabin. At the top of the tower was a small lookout point.

The lookout shone a soft gold in the light of dusk.

Two men stood there. Squinting, they watched the sun set in the distance. Their eyes on the sky and the land out west.

“You think that traveler from earlier’s camping out there somewhere?” asked one of the men.

“Dunno. I guess,” answered the other.

“Anyway...”

“Mhm?”

“I’m sick of this place. This view.”

“Mhm.”

“The sky keeps changing color. During the day you get birds chirping like crazy and during the night it’s the bugs. I hate the fireflies, too. And those stupid

rainbows we get after a storm.”

“Mhm.”

“This is depressing. I can’t wait to go home. Cozy up in the basement watching shows all day.”

“Mhm.”

“Whoever put up this damned watchtower’s probably never thought about how hard we have it here. How much it kills motivation and efficiency.”

“Mhm.”

The sun set completely.

The perfectly circular ball of light hid itself below the horizon. A small red light was left in the dark, shining brightly like a gemstone.

The faint orange sky grew fainter. The blue darkened, and the purple began to cover the world.

The world was flat as a gentle sea, carpeted by early-summer grass and trees, and dotted with lakes starting to lose their sparkle.

A gentle wind brushed past the leaves.

“I’m so sick of this place,” said one of the men. And he went to climb down the ladder. “Shift’s finally over. I’m going on ahead, Will.”

“Mhm,” the other man mumbled, listening to his partner leave.

And he fell into thought.

Otogaso -Preface-

Kino no Tabi was originally submitted as an entry for this contest in 2000. It was a finalist, but it did not win. However, soon after, it was serialized in Dengeki hp.

On a certain day and month in the year 2001. A phone rang in Keiichi Sigsawa's apartment.

Sigsawa: (picks up the phone) "Hello, who's this?"

Mysterious man: (in a man's voice) "Good afternoon. Is this the Sigsawa residence?"

Sigsawa: "I don't deny that, but who might you be?"

Self-proclaimed Kino: "Oh, sorry for not introducing myself. I am Kino."

Sigsawa: "... Huh? I don't get what you mean."

Self-proclaimed Kino: "I said I am Kino, the protagonist in your novel. Nice to meet you."

Sigsawa: "..... Sorry but I am going to hang up now. As in, right now."

Self-proclaimed Kino: "Don't do that. After I went out of my way to call you? How rude."

Sigsawa: "Well, no offense... but, you sound too old to be Kino."

Self-proclaimed Kino: "Ah. Indeed, I am already fifty-four years old. I teach economics at some university in Tokyo. I am quite popular with the female students, you know. I even receive a lot of chocolates every Valentine's Day."

Sigsawa: "No one asked you for that. How did you get my number anyway?"

Self-proclaimed Kino: "I could still find out even if no one told me, I am Kino after all."

Sigsawa: "..... If you are Kino, then where is Hermes right now?"

Self-proclaimed Kino: “I ran into Shizu, and Hermes was having a duel with his dog.”

Sigsawa: “... A duel with Riku? How?”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Reaching no conclusion after throwing insults at each other for three days and three nights, they said they are going to settle it with a 50 meter back stroke. Hermes has left for the sea with a pair of diving goggles, but he hasn’t returned yet. Maybe he has been swept out to open sea?”

Sigsawa: “..... What about Shizu?”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Some guys on an internet forum said that Shizu is my pedophilic stalker. That man went to get an explanation out of them. He said it will take some time because there are a number of them.”

Sigsawa: “..... What about Master?”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “She’s been charged under the Firearms Act and is in police custody at Shibuya station. She’ll probably escape soon and start a gunfight. The police can’t handle her alone, so they may have to mobilize the armed forces.”

Sigsawa: “..... The Kino in my works doesn’t talk like that.”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Hmph—— you’ve lost.”

Sigsawa: “What do you mean by that?”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Never mind. Anyway, I see ‘A Safe Country’^[15] was rejected again. Will it ever see the light of day?”

Sigsawa: “W-wait! How did you know that? Only me, my editor and that spider that I talk to in my room know!”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Because I am Kino.”

Sigsawa: “.....”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “There are lots of other things that I know. For instance, ‘The Land of Couples’^[16] was edited from a rejected short story for volume two. The version of ‘Colosseum’^[17] you submitted for the Dengeki Game Novel Prize^[18] has a scene where I was wounded and lying half-naked for treatment,

not to mention sewing up my jacket. 'Kino' was a name you came up with for the male protagonist of another story, but gave it to me in a hurry since you ended up not using that one.

Sigsawa: "Wow!"

Self-proclaimed Kino: "'Wow'?"

Sigsawa: "So it's true! ... Amazing! I never thought Kino really did exist! You are Kino, right?"

Kino: "That's what I'm telling you from the very beginning.... Just because you are an author, that doesn't mean you have to be suspicious of anything and everything all the time."

Sigsawa: "S-sorry. I'll reconsider my skepticism."

Kino: "I have to go now."

Sigsawa: "No way! Don't go yet! Please! Let's talk some more! Ah yes, which country is the most memorable for you? Please tell me so I can write it down!"

Kino: "Sadly... my three days are up."

Sigsawa: "... Please, five more minutes!"

Kino: "Come on, Hermes. Let's go. Goodbye." (loud engine noise) Sigsawa: "No wait!"

Kino: "Hermes, is that seaweed?" (voice getting distant) Sigsawa: "Ah... Wait... Please don't leave..." (tearful voice) *Beep beep beep*

Keiichi Sigsawa

January 2002